

Science Fantasy



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**MEDUSA
WAS A LADY**
by William Tenn

ONE GUITAR
by Sam Merwin Jr.

YOU TAKE THE HIGH ROAD
by Stephen Marlowe

THERE'S NO WAY OUT
by William P. McGivren

WITNESS FOR THE DEFENSE
by Paul W. Fairman

THE GIRL IN THE GOLDEN WIG by Chester S. Geir

CHECKMATE TO DEMOS by H. B. Hickey

HE KNEW ALL THE ANSWERS
by Dallas Ross

STRANGE CULTS

by Sandy Miller

THE word "cult" derives from the Latin *Colo*, to worship. Now we tend to use the word in looser sense, applying it to almost any sort of organization. Yet in its best sense it should be reserved for the naming of strange and weird religious sects. Normally when we speak of cults we think of odd foreign religious societies like the Leopard-men of Central Africa, of the Haitian voodoo groups. But there are hundreds of odd cultist societies in our own country. Most recently, the snake-worshippers of certain sections of our country have occupied the news. By no means are these all; equally well-known are the voodoo worshippers of some of the southern states. Recently, investigators of the unusual uncovered one of the strangest of all cults in California.

It was called "Brothers of Revenge" and was endowed and supported by a wealthy retired banker. The cult was just what its name implied. It was an organization of about thirty persons, both men and women, who took much of their practices from the study of the original voodoo rites of Haiti. The thesis of the cult was that revenge against an enemy could be obtained by a sort of devil's worship. Once every week, a meeting of this select group was arranged in the home of the retired banker. One room of his lavish home had been set aside for the use of the devotees. It was a large square, former living room that was painted completely black, a shiny, jet-black. From the ceiling of the room was suspended a single, large electric light bulb surrounded by a red glass cover. Arranged in a circle about this lamp, were small tables, enough for all present, with low stools to sit on behind the tables. The tables and stools were black as well. In fact all ornamentation of the room with the exception of the lamp was the same shiny black.

On the tables were small piles of black modeling clay such as is used by sculptors, a small tool for working the clay, and a number of knitting needles, also painted black. Each Wednesday evening, the members of "Brothers of Revenge", mostly ordinary work-a-day persons, with their personal grievances against someone, would gather in this central meeting room. The reporter who described the activities of the group was shocked by the intensity with which the affair was conducted.

The head of the cult, the retired banker, would intone strange prayers presumably directed to the father of evil, the Devil. In sonorous impressive tones he would call upon the Devil to give his neophytes assistance in whatever they might wish. Then each member of the cult would proceed to make a doll-like image of a human being—it could be done in the crudest fashion possible,



merely one lump of clay attached to a larger lump of clay. Then to this doll each person would attach some personal article of the person on whom he desired revenge—say, a fingernail paring or a strand of hair. In fact, the procedure was identical to that practiced by the voodoo-believers of Haiti. It differed in not one respect.

Then the leader of this obnoxious cult would call on his followers to "have faith" in what they were doing and their revenge would be assured for their victims would suffer untold agony and then die at the pleasure of the master of all evil, the Devil. This nonsense, was taken with all seriousness by all the persons involved. The reporter-witness could hardly believe his own eyes when he saw such practices by presumed educated people, right here and now in the twentieth century.

After witnessing these rites which were climaxed by conversation and wine, in the living-room of the host, wherein demonology and other practices were discussed, the affair broke up.

The reporter called this to the attention of the police, but was laughed at by the authorities who explained that because no injuries had been done, they could take no action. Whether any of the poor deluded people, seeking revenge for fancied wrongs got any satisfaction is not known. Never-the-less it is known that the cult still practices today.

Verily likely it is not the only one of its type to be in action. Periodically such things are reported. It is amazing that people can have such faith in such archaic practices. The fact remains, that though we may laugh, they continue to go on in their own way.

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WORLDS OF WONDER

SCIENCE FANTASY



WILLIAM TENN	4	MEDUSA WAS A LADY!
SAM MERWIN JR.	52	ONE GUITAR
STEPHEN MARLOWE	64	YOU TAKE THE HIGH ROAD
WILLIAM P. McGIVERN	74	THERE'S NO WAY OUT!
CHESTER S. GEIR	82	THE GIRL IN THE GOLDEN WIG
H. B. HICKEY	102	CHECKMATE TO DEMOS
PAUL W. FAIRMAN	120	WITNESS FOR THE DEFENSE
DALLAS ROSS	126	HE KNEW ALL THE ANSWERS

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Medusa Was A

By William Tenn





*A myth is as good as a mile Percy found out
after he killed Medusa and she didn't die*

*"And thence came the son of
Danae, flaming with courage and
spirit;*

*Wise Athena brought him thus to
the fellowship of these stalwart
men.*

*He slew the Gorgon and
winged back, bringing to the
islanders*

*The head with its writhing
snake-locks, the Terror that froze
to stone."*

—Pindar, *Pythian*

THE BIT of parchment on which the words were written in large, blotty letters had a bad smell. Like everything else in the apartment, Percy S. Yuss thought bitterly. He turned the parchment around in his fingers—annoyed at the strange discomfort he experienced in handling it—and grunted in disbelief.

Its back still had a few fine brown hairs clinging to the badly tanned surface. Someone had evidently gone to the trouble of killing an animal and skinning it, merely to write a translation of a long-dead poet's little-known verse.

Such eccentrics as these three rooms had known!

He dropped the handkerchief-size square of dead tissue on the floor, with the rest of the fantastic garbage, that varied from a ballet dancer's worn white slippers to four wooden chair legs which had evidently been chopped off with an exceedingly sharp axe—to judge from the unbelievable smoothness of the cut-away surface.

What an amazing and varied collection of junk! He shook his head as he shepherded the stuff into a great pile with the broom he'd discovered in the kitchen. A man's safety razor, a woman's curling iron, notebook upon notebook filled with strange and unrecognizable scripts. Not to mention the heap of locked suitcases on the top of which he'd just chucked his own

battered valise.

In these days, one did not look gift apartments in the foyer, so to speak. Still, he couldn't help wondering why these previous tenants hadn't bothered to come back for their possessions. He found himself tingling uncomfortably as when he'd first seen the parchment.

Maybe they hadn't paid their rent. No, that couldn't be. It was such a wonderfully small rent, that even people who didn't own a half interest in a mildly bankrupt hash-house wouldn't have too much trouble raising it. It had been the lowness of the rental figure that had made Percy scramble frantically in his wallet for the thirty-five dollars' worth of cumshaw the superintendent had demanded. After years of tramping from dismal furnished room to dingy sublet to get at long last a place as cheap as this in his own name!

Percy sighed the smug, deeply happy sigh of the happy householder. It smelled, it was badly littered and would require at least two full days to get clean, but it was his, all his. Enthusiastically, he bent his back into the broom again.

THE HALL door opened and Mrs. Danner walked in without knocking. From the living room, where he was scraping the rubbish together, Percy saw the rather badly used-up old lady who served as a combination janitor, building superintendent and renting-agent, stagger into his kitchen. A half-empty fifth of whiskey swung restlessly from one bony hand as a kind of liquid epitaph to thirty-five dollars that had once been in Percy's possession and was no longer.

She leaned against a wall, first patting it gently so that it wouldn't get frightened and leap away. "Good old, lovely old, moneymaking apartment," she muttered. "They come and they go, they come and they go, but you're

always left for me. And every time they come, little Marybelle Danner gets another ten bottles. Darling gorgeous old apartment, you're my *splurfsk!*"

The last word, Percy realized as he walked sternly into the kitchen, was not an entirely novel term of endearment coined on the spot by Mrs. Danner, as much as it was a very ordinary word dissolved beyond recognition into the hearty gulp of whiskey with which she frequently punctuated her sentences.

"Pretty apartment!" she continued, rubbing her back against the filthy wall like a kitten which had grown to lanky old age without ever having become a cat. "The owners don't pay me enough to feed the teensiest canary, my children don't care what becomes of their sweet old ma, but you watch out for me, don't you? You won't let me *sturvlelglg*. Every single time a new tenant—"

She lowered the bottle with which she had been preparing a new and moister period. She leaned forward from the hips, blinking madly through worn, red-lined eyes. "You still here?"

"Yes, I'm still here," Percy told her angrily. "After all, I just moved in this morning! What are you doing in my apartment?"

Mrs. Danner straightened. She waved her head from side to side like a bewildered grey banner. "How can he still be here?" she asked the neck of the bottle in a confidential whisper. "It's been over four hours since he took possession. None of the others ever stayed that *lurngsh!*" She wiped her lips. "Not one of them!"

"Look here. I paid one month's rent in advance. I also gave you a big hunk of cash under the table, even though it's illegal. I have to work pretty hard for my money in a hot and stinking little luncheonette that seems to go further into the red with every bit of business we do."

"Too bad," Mrs. Danner told him

consolingly. "We should never have elected Hoover. I voted for Al *Smiggugglug*. He wouldn't have let the Kaiser get away. Here. You need a drinkie before you disappear."

"The reason," Percy went on patiently, "that I paid you all this cabbage was so I could have an apartment of my own. I don't want you walking in without knocking. This is my place. Now was there anything you wanted?"

She batted her eyes mournfully at him, took another shot, belched and started for the door. "All I wanted was the apartment. But if it isn't ready yet, it just isn't *reyurmph*. I can wait another hour or two if I have to. I'm no *purksk*."

THE NEW tenant closed the door behind her very carefully. He noticed again that there was an area of splintered wood around the place where the lock had been—as if it had been necessary to break the door down upon the last occupant.

What did that point to? Suicide, maybe. Or Mrs. Danner's mention of disappearances—could that be taken seriously? It would explain all that queer junk, all those full suitcases, as if people had just been moving in when—

When what? This was the scientific twentieth century and he was in one of the most civilized cities on the face of the Earth. People didn't just walk into a cold tenement flat on the west side and vanish. No, it wasn't logical.

Anyway, he'd better get a lock on the door before he left for work. He glanced at his watch. He had an hour and a half. Just enough time to take a quick bath, buy the lock and screw it on. He'd finish cleaning the place tomorrow.

The bath was a tiny, four-foot affair that stood high on angle-iron legs beside the kitchen sink. It had a huge enamel cover that was hinged to the wall. There was more junk piled on

the cover than there had been on the floor. With a sigh, Percy began to carry the stuff into the half-clean living room.

By the time he was through, the other room was a mess again and he was hot, tired and disgusted. Trust Percy Sacrist Yuss to get this kind of bargain, he thought angrily as he wedged the cover up against the wall, filled the little bathtub with water, and began to undress. A dark, dirty apartment, filled with the garbage of countless previous tenants, and not only had he had to pay extra money to get the place, but now it seemed there was a curse on it too. And a curious drunken female superintendent who would probably let him have all the privacy of a hot suspect in the Monday morning police line-up!

He took a towel and a fresh bar of soap from his valise. His mood grew blacker as he realized his feet had become coated with a kind of greasy grime as a result of standing on the kitchen floor. The place probably had vermin, too.

Bending down to brush off his feet so that he wouldn't carry the soil requirements of a potato patch into the bathtub, he noticed a scrap of white on the floor. It was the parchment with the fragment of classic poetry laboriously traced out on one side. He'd scuffed it into the kitchen while tramping back and forth.

As he glanced at it cursorily once more, another peculiar electric shiver went through him with the force of a galloping virus infection:

*"...He slew the Gorgon and
winged back, bringing to the
islanders*

*The head with its writhing snake-
locks, the Terror that froze to
stone."*

WHO WAS it who had slain the Gorgon? Some character in Greek mythology—but who exactly he just couldn't remember. For some rea-

son, the identity and the name escaped him completely. And usually he had a fine memory for such little items. Twenty years spent working out crossword puzzles after a frenzied day dealing them off the arm in dining-cars was almost the equivalent of a college education.

He shrugged and flipped the parchment away. To his annoyance, it bounced off the upright bathtub cover and into the water. Trust his luck! He hung the towel on a crossbar of the tall bathtub legs and climbed in, having to duck his head and twist his shoulders down laboriously to avoid the wooden dish-closets set on the wall some three feet above the tub.

His knees were well out of the water in the little bathtub, practically digging into his chest. Washing himself under these conditions was going to be real cozy!

It was impossible now to recapture the earlier mood of exultation at having an apartment of his own. He felt he'd been taken, as he'd felt all through his life after being persuaded to go into some scheme or other. Like buying a half-interest in a restaurant which the sheriff already regarded with fond proprietary interest.

"I'm not even taken," he said unhappily. "I give myself away!"

And on top of everything, the plug leaked! The level of water sank rapidly down to his hips. Cursing his parents for being attracted to each other in the first place, Percy reached forward to jab it more securely in place. As he did so, the parchment, floating face up on the water, caught his eye.

Long strands of hair now trailed it wetly, and the words were beginning to dissolve in the water. He wasn't interested in it; more, he felt very strongly that he shouldn't be interested in it, that here, in this bit of archaic verse, was more living danger

than he had ever known in his screaming nightmares. He felt that strange tingle begin again in the inner recesses of his body, and knew that his instincts to toss it away had been right, that the curiosity that impelled him to read it every time he picked it up was utterly, terribly—

*"And thence came the son of
Danac—"*

ALMOST against his will, his mind wondered. *Thence?* Where *thence?* Somehow, he felt he knew. But why should he feel that way? He'd never read a line by Pindar before. And why should he be wondering about it in the first place? He had other troubles, lots of them.

His hand swept the parchment up like a particularly disgusting insect. Up and over the side of the bathtub. Right into the bluish waves that billowed all around him.

Into the sea.

He hardly had time to let his jaw drop. Because the bathtub began to sink. Percy was bailing before he realized he was doing it.

This time the water was bubbling into the tub. With a convulsive gesture of his entire body that almost threw him over the side, he clamped his left foot down hard upon the defective plug and splashed the tepid mixture out with two threshing, barely-cupped hands.

In spite of his inaccurate roiling and tossing, he had the tub all but emptied in a matter of seconds. A thin trickle of sea-water still lounged out from between his toes. He reached over the side, noticing uncomfortably that the rim was a bare two inches above the sea's restless surface. Yes, the towel was still in place, knotted intricately around the cross-bar. It was soaking wet, but it made a magnificent reinforcement for the plug. With fingers that had sharpened into

a remarkable deftness under the grinding surprise of the moment, he jabbed corners of the towel all around the edges of the rubber plug.

Not perfect, but it would hold back the wafers. Now, where was he?

He was in a bathtub which—temporarily at least—was floating in a warm and only slightly choppy sea, a sea of the deepest, most thrilling azure he had ever seen. Ahead, an island rose in a mass of incredibly stately and delicately colored hills.

Behind him there was another strip of land, but it was lost in a gentle mist and was too far away for him to determine whether it too was an island or the outstretched finger of a continent.

To the right, there was more blue sea. To the left—

Again he almost fell out of the tub. Some fifty feet off to the left was quite the largest sea-serpent he had ever seen in or out of the Sunday Supplements.

And it was humping along the waves directly at him!

Percy leaned forward and paddled madly at the water on both sides of his tub. What a world, he thought, what an insane world for a quiet man to find himself in! What had he ever done to deserve—

HE HEARD a peculiar rattle of sound, like a cement-mixer gargling, and looked up to see the monster staring down at him through unwinking eyes. It was, the back of his mind gibbered, all of two feet in diameter: no doubt it could swallow him without even gulping. A row of bright red feathers plumed up from the top of his head as the great mouth opened slowly to reveal countless rows of jagged, fearful teeth.

If only he had a weapon! A knife of any sort, a stone, a club... Percy clambered upright in the tub, his fists

clenched desperately. As the mouth opened to its fullest width and the forked tongue that looked as sharp and deadly as a two-headed spear coiled back upon itself, he lashed out with his right arm, putting into the blow all the strength of cornered despair.

His fist caught the beast on its green lower lip.

"Ouch!" it said. "Don't do that!"

It swirled away from him so vehemently that his little enameled craft was almost swamped. Licking its lip with its flickering tongue, it paused to stare back at him indignantly over a glistening coil.

"That hurt, you know? All I wanted to do was say, 'Welcome, son of Danae,' and you have to go and bop me one! You won't make many friends acting like that, I can tell you!"

The monster swam a bit further away and curved to face the goggling Percy standing limply in his bathtub.

"You didn't even ask if I was working for the snake-mother or Poseidon or whatever! Maybe for all you know I'm an independent operator. Maybe I have a bit of information that would save your life or the life of someone pretty important to you. No, all you can do is hit me," the creature sneered. "And on the lip, which as everyone knows is my most sensitive part! All right, son of Danae, if that's the way you want it, that's the way it's going to be. I won't help you."

With a kind of rippling shrug that threaded disdainfully from the enormous head down to the thin delicacy of a tail, the sea-serpent dived. And was gone.

Percy sat down carefully, feeling the hard sides of the tub as caressingly as if they were his own sanity.

Where in the world was he? Or, rather, where out of it was he? A man starts to take a bath in his new apartment and winds up in—in— Was that

how the others had gone?

He stared over the side through the clear sea. The legs of painted angle-iron which had supported the bath-tub were sheared off cleanly about halfway down. Fortunately, the faucets had been shut off; the pipes were also cut. Like something else. He remembered the chair legs back in the apartment.

Four chair legs minus a chair. Somewhere, then, in this world there might be a chair without legs. Containing someone who had purchased an apartment from Mrs. Danner.

PERCY REALIZED suddenly that there was a very bad taste in his mouth. An awful taste, in fact.

Of course. The soap. When he'd started bailing upon arrival in this weird place, he had a cake of soap in his hand. He'd stuck it in his mouth. And up to now he hadn't had a really peaceful moment in which to remove it.

He extracted the somewhat soggy pink bar from his teeth with a distinct lack of relish and washed his mouth out carefully with sea water. As he did so, he noticed that he had drifted much closer to the island. There was evidence of life somewhere behind the beach, a few slowly moving human beings and a cluster of huts or bouses—at this distance it was hard to tell which.

What were his resources in dealing with this new world? He considered them ruefully. A slightly used cake of soap. An extremely wet bath towel. A round rubber plug, too badly worn to do its job properly. And a bathtub, if he could move it once he got to shore.

Then, of course, there was himself. "Like if the natives go in for human steak," he grimaced.

A sea-serpent that talked! Whose

dignity had been injured, who had even gone so far as to— Wait a minute! What had it called him?

Son of Danae.

But he wasn't!

"Go tell the sea-serpent," he told himself fiercely. He remembered the verse on the bit of parchment abruptly: "*The head with its writhing snake-locks—*"

"I've got to get out of here!" he commented restlessly and with tremendous conviction, glancing from the rocking tub to the placid rolling sea from which anything might be expected.

For a moment, when the net flapped down upon his shoulders, Percy had the frantic idea that he'd been overheard by some deity who had hurried to cooperate. He struggled, threshing wildly against the coarse, knotted fibers that tore at his skin. Then, as he felt the entire tub caught in the huge skein and being drawn rapidly toward shore, he relaxed into *now what?* hopelessness and tried to see what had happened.

HE HAD drifted in front of a cliff-like promontory of the island. A group of men dressed in loin-cloths were dancing about on the edge of the cliff, cheering a richly-clad fellow who, from a precarious foothold halfway down the steep face, had flung the net and, with dexterous twists of wrist and forearm, was now hauling it in.

"Attaboy, Dictys!" one of them yelled as the tub beached, turned over and, with Percy crashing around under it, was dragged up the side of the cliff. "You got it all right, all right."

"That Dictys," another commented admiringly. "He's death on sea monsters. This'll be the third he caught this week."

"The fourth," Dictys corrected as he scrambled to the top of the cliff

with the bathtub and the net-enclosed man both securely on his shoulder. "You forgot the pigmy mermaid—half-woman, half-sardine. I count it even though she was kind of small. But this'll be the best of the lot. I've never seen anything like it before."

He unwound the net rapidly with long-practised gestures. Percy climbed out of the tub and flopped on the ground. He felt like a bag of well-gnawed bones.

Dictys picked him up with a huge hand, held him out for inspection. "This isn't a monster," he said in evident bitter disappointment. "It comes apart: half of it is a man and the rest is a round sort of chest. And I thought it was something really unusual! Oh well," he mused, lifting Percy over his head with the obvious intention of throwing him back into the sea, "You can't hit it all the time."

"Maybe," suggested an oldster on the edge of the group, "maybe he is a monster. He could have changed into a man just now. He might know that if he's a monster we'd put him in your brother's zoo, but if he's a man we'd throw him back because we've got lots of people here already."

The tall man nodded thoughtfully. "You might have something there, Agesilaus. I'd hate to go back to King Polydectes empty-handed. Well, there's an easy way of finding out."

What kind of world is this? Percy was frantic. "—if he's a man we'd throw him back because we've got lots of people here already!"

And what kind of test were they going to apply?

He noticed that the well-dressed fisherman had unsheathed the great single-bladed sword he wore on his back. He ground the point of it into Percy's chest interrogatively.

"You better change to your particular monstrous form fast, sonny.

Because you're not going to have the pleasure of being returned to the drink. Instead, I'm going to cut you up into six distinct and separate slices in just a few seconds. You'll be *much* better off in my brother's cages. Now then, what exactly are you?"

PERCY BEAT against his forehead with an open palm. What was he supposed to do—develop a quick-change routine on the spot that included wings, flippers and a Siamese twin? Because if he didn't, he was evidently going to become cutlets.

"All right," Dictys said, frowning. "Go ahead—be stubborn. See what it gets you."

He whirled the bronze blade experimentally around his head, then curved it back for a tremendous stroke.

Percy swallowed as he saw it glint redly at him. "I'll talk," he babbled. "I'll tell you about myself! I'm—I'm—"

What could he tell them that would make sense in their terms? What kind of lie could he compose in a hurry that they would believe? They wanted him to make like a monster.

Monster! He'd talked to a—

The words boiled rapidly out of his lips. He had no time to weigh them. "I'm the man the sea-serpent welcomed as the son of Danae." He hoped it would at least give the big fellow pause.

It did.

Dictys lowered his sword and stepped back stariog. "The—the son of Danae? The one who's going to kill the Gorgon?"

"The same." Percy nodded with the self-conscious grandeur of a celebrity discovered by the night-club m.c. at a ringside table. "The...the famous Gorgon killer. The—the man who brought the islanders the head with the writhing snake-locks, the Terror

that—"

"Who *will* bring, you mean," Dictys corrected him. "It's not done yet. Well, well, well. You're kind of scrawny for that sort of job, even if you do have red hair. What's your name?"

"Percy. Percy S. Yuss."

"Right!" Agesilaus yelled from the rear. He came hurrying up, his beard flaunting behind him like an oversized white woolen necktie. "It figures, Dictys, it figures! Right on the dot of the prophecy. His name's Perseus, he has red hair, you caught him in a fish-net—everything happened exactly the way the oracle said—"

Dictys thrust out his lower lip and shook his head. "Oracles are one thing. Muscles are another. Nobody's going to tell me that this weakling is going to tackle the beast that frightens the bravest men and even other monsters, no matter how powerful. Look at him—he's quivering with fear already!"

THIS WAS not exactly true. Percy became chilled standing on the windy hillside in nothing but his wet skin. There was, besides, an emotional reaction to all his recent experiences setting in. But there was also a mounting discomfort at the way they were discussing his capabilities as a Gorgon-killer. He'd thrown in the sentence merely as a means of distracting Dictys temporarily; now it seemed they couldn't get off the subject. The beast that frightened men and gods!

He thought back wistfully to a few minutes ago when he'd been riding a serpent-infested sea in a leaky bathtub. Ah, those were carefree, happy times!

"His name's not even Perseus," Dictys was arguing. "It's Persaesus or something. You're not going to tell me that this bedraggled bumpkin will become the most famous hero of all time?"

Agesilaus nodded vehemently. "He

certainly will! As far as the name's concerned, I think it's close enough. Sometimes the oracle gets names mixed up. But here's the chest in which the oracle said Perseus would arrive with his mother, Danae, after King Acrisus of Argos tossed them into the sea."

"Yes, but the oracle said the infant Perseus," another loin-clothed man broke in. "Didn't she?"

"Well," Agesilaus hedged. "Sometimes the oracle gets ages mixed up too." The old man looked a little now as if he were no longer certain about oracular dependability on any matter.

Percy found himself sympathizing with him. Agesilaus was evidently pleading his case, but he wasn't certain which way he'd be worse off, if the old man won or lost.

Dictys came in fast for the argumentative kill. "If King Acrisius of Argos, according to the oracle, threw Perseus and his mother into the chest, then where is Danae? And another thing, Agesilaus. Argos is that way," he pointed with a braceleted hand. "Northwest. This fellow came from the east. No, he's an impostor trying to cash in on the prophecy. And I don't like impostors."

He reached down for a couple of lengths of rope with which several of the men had been repairing holes in the net. Before Percy could get a word of protest out of his slowly opening mouth, he was tripped expertly and tossed to the ground. In a moment, he was tied up as tightly as an expensive Christmas present.

"What's the penalty for impersonating a hero?" Dictys asked Agesilaus. The packaging job completed, he removed his knee from the gasping young man's back and rose.

"For impersonating a hero," the old man said thoughtfully, with an unsatisfied frown still creasing his face, "the penalty's the same as for blasphemy. Cooking over a slow fire. In

fact, since your brother, King Polydectes, reformed the legal system, practically every crime is punishable by cooking over a slow fire. Your brother says it makes it easier for him to pass sentence that way. He doesn't have to remember a whole calendar of complicated punishments."

"That's why we call him Wise King Polydectes," one of the younger men exclaimed, and everyone nodded enthusiastically.

"Listen—" Percy began screaming from the ground. Dictys stuck a handful of grass into his mouth. There was enough loose soil attached to make the gag a verb as well as a noun. He was so busy strangling that he had little energy for observation and less for an attempt to escape when two of the men slung him to a pole and began carrying him downhill over highly uneven ground.

"Hi, there, Menon," he heard someone call as he was borne choking and sneezing along a dusty road. "Whatcha got?"

"Don't know for sure," the forward bearer replied. "I think it's kettle bait."

"You don't say! This crime-wave gets more frightening every week!"

BY THE time Percy had worked the last of the foliage out of his mouth, they had passed through the huge gateway of a stone-walled citadel and into a cluster of small but surprisingly well-built brick houses.

His pole was placed in two forked sticks set upright in the main thoroughfare of the town. He dangled from the tight ropes, feeling his blood grinding to a halt.

A group of curious men and women gathered around asking questions of his two guards.

"Is that the latest monster Dictys has caught?" a woman wanted to know. "He doesn't seem to be very

unusual." She poked experimentally at choice spots on his naked body. "Practically normal, I'd say."

"Stew-job," the bearer said laconically. "Nice tender stew-job,

As far as was possible in his tightly-laced condition, Percy writhed. No, this couldn't be happening to him—this just couldn't be! A man doesn't start taking a bath in a new apartment and wind up in a world where everything from burglary to barratry is punished by—

"I will not consider that thought," his mind announced. "I know when I'm well off."

Certain things were clear to him, though, disagreeably clear. He had somehow fallen into a past which had never really existed, the time of the Greek mythos. Never really existed? The sea-serpent's indignation had been real enough, and so were the ropes with which he was bound. So, he suspected, would be the punishment, if he were found guilty of impersonating a hero.

Odd, that. The serpent addressing him as the son of Danae, who was evidently the mother of Perseus. His own name, which formed a combination of syllables remarkably like the Gorgon killer's. The bit of parchment he'd found in the apartment which evidently had helped precipitate him into this mess, and the subject of the snatch of poetry written upon it. The way he'd come close to the legend in various other ways, such as the arrival by sea—

No! When his trial came up, he wanted to plead absolute innocence, that he had no knowledge whatever of the Perseus prophecy and no interest at all in it. Otherwise, thinking all those other thoughts could only lead in one direction....

He shivered violently and vibrated the pole briefly.

"Poor fellow, he's cold! a girl's voice said sympathetically.

"That's all right. King Polydectes will warm him up," a man told her. Everyone guffawed. Percy vibrated the pole again.

"I never said I was Perseus!" the bound young man broke out despairingly. "All I did was tell your Dictys that the sea-serpent—"

"You'd better shut up," the bearer who had been called Menon advised him in a confidential, friendly manner. "For trying to influence the jury before a trial, you can have your tongue torn out by the roots—whether you're eventually found guilty or innocent."

PERCY DECIDED to keep quiet.

Every time he opened his mouth, he put the local criminal code in it. He was getting deeper and deeper into the most fantastic trouble and didn't have the slightest idea how to go about getting out of it. Or how he'd gotten into it in the first place.

Mrs. Danner. He hated Mrs. Danner, how he hated that profiteering old female souse! She, if anyone, was responsible for his present situation. She'd evidently known that the apartment was some kind of exit apparatus; when she'd walked in unannounced, she had expected to find the place empty. If only he'd given a little more attention to her gleeful maunderings!

How long had people been noticing that sign outside the tenement entrance? "Three-Room Apartment for Rent. Very Cheap. Immediate Occupancy!"

How many had run in and excitedly paid her the thirty-five dollars "renting-fee" she demanded, then bolted home to gather up enough personal belongings to take formal possession? And then, a few moments after entry, while measuring the bedroom for furniture arrangements perhaps, or considering the walls relative to a daring color scheme idea, or prying loose a badly stuck window—had suddenly

fallen through into this world of magic and violence?

How long had Mrs. Danner been making a good thing out of this apartment, how many "renting-fees" had she acquired? Percy didn't know, but he thought dreamily of coming upon her some time in a locked room. Forgetting his painfully bound hands and feet for a moment, he mused gently on the delightful softness of her throat under a pair of insistent thumbs.

Although she couldn't be the whole answer. She didn't know enough about anything outside of the latest quotations on whiskey-by-the-case-F.O.B.-distillery to have created the peculiar chronological trap that the apartment contained. Who was it then? Or what? And, above all and most important, why?

Dictys had come up, surrounded by his bully-boys in semi-sarongs.

"A bad day," he told the town-folk. "Didn't catch a single solitary horror. Just this fake hero."

"That's all right, Dictys," the man who had previously expressed confidence in the King's thermal reliability reassured him. "He'll still be a good excuse for a party."

"Sure," someone else chimed in. "With an execution, the evening won't be entirely lost."

"I know, I know," Dictys admitted morosely. "But I wanted a specimen for the zoo. An execution won't be the same thing at all."

WHILE MOST of the surrounding individuals applauded the extremely commendable detachment of so scientific an attitude, Percy saw a man with a voluminous white mantle push out to the front of the group and look at him more closely and curiously than anyone else had. The man had a peculiarly bright saffron skin, Percy noticed, when a fold of the cloak came down from his face for a moment.

"What made you think he was a monster?" the man asked Dictys, putting the fold carefully back in place.

"The chest he was riding. From the cliff, it looked like part of him. It was round and white and had all kinds of metal pieces sticking out. I've never seen anything like it before—and I've been to the mainland twice."

"Where is the chest?"

The large man pointed over his shoulder with a thumb the size of a small banana. "Oh, we left it on the cliff with the rest of the stuff he had in it. You can never tell about strange pieces of furniture: sometimes they come alive or burst into flame or—*Say!* Are you a stranger in town?"

The white-cloaked man dropped a hand to his mid-section. He passed it once across his abdomen and, as Dictys advanced truculently upon him, he disappeared.

There were breaking bubbles of comment all through the crowd.

"What was that?"

"Where in the world did he go, Eupapius?"

"I don't know but, if you ask me, he wasn't all human."

"Mama, I wanna go home!"

"Sh-h-h, Leontis. There may be a cooking today. You wouldn't want to miss that, would you?"

"What do you think he was, Dictys?"

Their leader scratched his matted hair. "Well, he couldn't have been what I thought he was, just an ordinary stranger passing through. I wanted to grab him and put him under arrest. If he was a stranger or a wandering merchant and had forgotten to register with the commander of the palace guard, he'd have been liable to the Foreigner's Penalty Tax."

"You mean all his goods impounded and his right arm burned off before his face?"

"More or less, at the discretion of the guard commander. But I think he must have been either a wizard or a major monster. In fact, from the color of his skin, I'd say he was a human-type monster. Wasn't it gold?"

Agesilaus nodded. "It was gold, all right. What they call on the mainland the *Olympian* type of monster. Those aren't supposed to be too bad. According to the mainlanders, they help men lots of times."

"When they help men, it's for their own good reasons," Dictys growled. "Not that I have anything against major monsters," he explained hurriedly to Agesilaus. "They have their own private quarrels and men should stay out of them if they don't want to get badly hurt."

FROM THE anxious speed with which he had added the last remark, Percy deduced a certain real fear of what the man called "major monsters". Evidently, minor monsters were something else again, since Dictys had been fishing for them and the king maintained a kind of zoo. But why had the golden-skinned stranger been so interested in him? Had he something to do with Percy's arrival here?

He had long lost all feeling in his wrists and ankles and was wondering dizzily if they intended to keep him hanging in the village square as a kind of permanent decoration, when there was a musical clank of metal armor and an uneven tramping of feet.

A very hoarse voice said, "King Polydectes of Seriphos will see the prisoner now."

Percy sighed with real gusto as two men shouldered his pole again and began jouncing him along the main avenue. Not only was he going to go to a place where his side of the story could be heard at last, but he now knew the name of the island kingdom on which his errant bathtub had stum-

bled so unceremoniously.

Seriphos. He went through his memory rapidly. No, he didn't know anything about an island called Seriphos. Except what he had learned in the past hour or so. That it was fairly close to the Greek mainland and therefore in the warm Aegean Sea. And that it was awaiting the fulfillment of an ancient legend to the effect that the Gorgon-killer Perseus was to land there sometime before starting out on his heroic quest.

Also, that it had a judicial system that bore a close resemblance to a power saw.

He was carried up a single step and into a courtyard with an enormous ceiling supported by four massive pillars of stone. Menon slipped the pole out of the rope loops at his hands and feet, and the other bearer cut his bonds with a few generous slashes of a long bronze knife.

They stood him on his feet and stepped back. "Feel better now?"

Percy pitched forward on his face. He bounced hard on the painted cement floor.

"His legs," Menon explained to his buddy. "They've fallen asleep."

"Always happens," the other said professionally. "Every damn time."

The return of circulation was grim, swirling agony. Percy moaned and rolled about on the floor rubbing his wrists and ankles with hands that felt like wooden boards. A few people came over and squatted down beside him for a moment to stare at his face or watch his struggles. No one offered to help.

After a while, he was able to bow-leg painfully upright. His guards grabbed him and shoved him between them against a pillar.

MOST OF the townspeople had followed him into the hall. The news was spreading, it would seem. Every few moments someone else came

in—butchers with their dripping meat cleavers, peasants with their scythes, women carrying rush baskets filled with berries and vegetables.

The newcomers would have him pointed out to them. Then they would either smile and nod slowly in satisfaction, or they would turn and run out fast, in evident haste to get Cousin Hybrias or Aunt Thea before all the fun was over.

In the middle of the courtyard, beside a blackened hearth roughly the size of the entire apartment which Percy had so recently vacated, a man sat on an enormously wide stone throne.

At first glance, he seemed to be lolling in a large number of strangely shaped cushions. Closer examination, however, revealed the cushions to be a fine collection of young and pretty girls who varied as much in their coloring as they did in their interest in the affairs of state going on before them. One extremely pretty blonde who formed part of the king's footstool was snoringly sound asleep. Another, a gorgeous Negro girl, most of whose body was obscured by a large masculine shoulder, was expostulating vehemently into the monarch's right ear and waving her hand at a moaning figure prostrate before the throne.

"See here, Tontibbi," the king told her at last in a highly exasperated voice, "I've got my own system of punishments and I don't want any decadent females from an over-civilized part of the world to be suggesting changes all the time no matter how imaginative they might be. We're rough-and-ready folk here on Seriphos, and we go in for simple entertainments. And if you African snobs want to go around calling us barbarians, well go right ahead. We're proud of the name."

The dark girl scowled and subsided back into the recesses of the great throne. The assembled crowd applaud-

ed vehemently.

"That's the way, Polydectes. You tell these stuck-up foreigners where to get off!" an elderly farmer cheered.

"Well," Polydectes said slowly and thoughtfully. "The way I see it—why shouldn't what was good enough in my father's day be good enough for me?"

"Don't you just love the way he puts things?" a beaming housewife remarked to her neighbor. "I think it's lovely to have a king who's so clever with words!"

"Besides," her friend replied, "I don't understand all this crazy desire for change all the time. What could be better than disposing of criminals by cooking them over a slow fire? The way King Polydectes' chef does it, we usually get four or five hours out of the weakest man. He starts after supper and by the time he's through it's quite dark and everyone feels like having a good night's sleep after a fine, enjoyable evening. Personally, I wouldn't dream of asking for anything more."

PERCY FELT his stomach turn in a slow, rocking half-circle. The man who was lying before the king screamed a little bit and tried to grind his face into the cement floor.

What kind of people were they anyway? They talked of the most horrible things with the same equanimity as if they might be discussing the latest movie or wrestling match they'd seen the night before on television.

Well, of course, public executions were the closest these people came to such things as movies or television. Percy remembered stories he'd read in the newspapers of crowds turning out to attend hangings in various parts of the United States. That was the twentieth century! And an execution was still a sufficiently fine spectacle for many men to bring their dates, for some women to bring their children and for a few enterprising business-

men to hawk tiny replicas of the gallows on which a fellow-human was frantically kicking his life away.

All of which was well and good, but didn't help him very much in his present predicament. If only he could figure out some approach which these people would honor, if only he could learn a little bit about their ideas of right and wrong in time to do himself some good!

He strained to catch every detail of what was going on. He needed clues as to their courtroom procedure. Would he get a lawyer to defend him? He doubted it from what he'd seen so far. Yet there had been talk of a trial, there had been mention of a jury. There was a little frozen comfort in these civilized institutions no matter how they were applied, he decided.

And then he wasn't so sure.

"I'm getting tired of this," the king broke into the prostrate prisoner's broken-hearted babble. He lifted his head and waved vaguely at the assembled crowd. "Hey, jury! Any of you willing to insist on this man's innocence?"

"Uh-uh. Guilty!"

"Guilty as hell!"

"The low-down beast! Cooking's too good for him. Hey, Brion, what'd he do?"

"How should I know? I just came in. Must have been something bad or he wouldn't be on trial."

"Guilty, guilty, guilty! Let's get on to the next case. That looks good!"

"Raise the prisoner for sentencing," King Polydectes commanded. Two guards leaped forward and lifted the writhing, pleading man. The king pointed a forefinger solemnly at the ceiling. "By virtue of the power vested in me by me," he intoned, "I hereby sentence you to—to...just a minute now. To—"

"To cooking over a slow fire," the

Negro girl behind him said bitterly. "Is it ever anything else?"

Polydectes pounded a barrel-like fist angrily into his open palm. "You better be careful, Tontibbi! You'll go into the kettle yourself if you don't watch out! You might have spoiled the whole legality of the trial! All right, take him away," he said in disgust. "You heard what she said. Do it."

"I'm sorry, Polydectes," the girl murmured contritely. "I get so bored! Go ahead, sentence him yourself."

The king shook his head unhappily. "Naa-a-ah! There's no pleasure in it anymore. Just try to control yourself from now on, huh?"

"I will," she promised, snuggling down again.

AS THEY lifted the vaguely struggling man by his arms, Percy gasped in horror. He understood why he hadn't been able to make out any of the prisoner's words—his tongue had been torn out! There were great drying crusts of blood all over his face and still more coming down his chin to his chest. The man was obviously so weak from loss of blood that he could hardly stand by himself, but so terrified by the agonizing imminence of his doom that he had been desperately trying to make himself understood in some way. His hands waved hopelessly and a dreadful tongueless moan kept rolling out of his mouth as he was dragged, his toes plowing thin furrows in the dust of the floor, off to a small room which was probably the execution antechamber.

"See?" Menon said to Percy who was feebly massaging his belly. "He tried to influence the jury before trial. From what I hear, they were the soldiers."

It began to make a kind of highly disagreeable sense, Percy decided.

Every citizen on the island—soldiers, civilians, policemen, noblemen, whatever—was a potential member of the jury in any criminal case. The fact that these people took the responsibilities of office rather lightly by the standards of the world he had just left was not as important as their right to crowd into any trial and participate in the verdict. Therefore, if you were arrested on Seriphos for an offense, no matter how flimsy the accusation, you must, above all, not protest your innocence. The man who arrested you would be a talesman; and the punishment for violating this particular law was swift and comprehensive. He began to feel a surprising glow of gratitude for the gag that Dictys had stuffed in his mouth. Why, the man had actually been human even though, instead of pulling Percy's tongue out, he had virtually shoved it down his throat!

But how could you defend yourself when people like these brought you to trial?

"Next case!" the king roared. "And let's cut it short. We're all getting hungry and there's a pretty good execution scheduled for after supper. I don't like to keep my people waiting."

"And that's why we call him Good King Polydectes," a woman murmured as Percy was dragged before the throne and flung down hard.

"Charged," a somewhat familiar voice said above his head, "with impersonating a hero, i.e., Perseus, who, according to the legend—"

"I heard the legend, Dictys," his brother said grumpily. "We went all through it in the previous case. Let's find this man guilty too and start to adjourn. I don't know why there are so many Perseus' these days and so few fake Heracles' or Theseus'. I guess it's like anything else; someone starts a fad and before you know what's happened everybody's doing it."

DICTYS' curiosity had been aroused. "What do you mean you went all through it in the previous case?"

"Oh, a couple of my soldiers were on duty up on the hills investigating a report that those small-size monsters, the flying ones, you know which I mean...?"

"Harpies?" You mean the ones with heads of girls and the bodies, wings and claws of birds, don't you?"

Polydectes sighed. "Those. It's wonderful to have a brother who knows his monsters so well. I get all mixed up whenever I try to keep them straight in my head. I just have a simple rule: if it has no more and no less than two arms, two legs and one head, then it's human. Otherwise, it's a monster."

"That leaves out the golden-skinned Olympians. They're not human either. I don't know exactly what they are, but a lot of people would classify them with the major monsters."

"And a lot wouldn't," the king pointed out. "So there you are. Where exactly it is that you are, I don't know, but— Anyway, there's been a couple of reports lately that these things, these Harpies, have been smuggling contraband into the island from the air and cutting into the royal revenues of Seriphos. I sent a squad up to Mount Lassus to look into the matter. They were settling down to a little meal before going into action when this man came blundering down the hill. They arrested him as soon as he told them he was Perseus. After they arrested him, of course, and he still tried to argue, they punished him on the spot for jury-tampering under my edict of last summer. Now, I felt they might have been a bit too zealous, but— What is this fellow still doing here? Didn't we find him guilty?"

"Not yet," Dictys assured him. "You haven't asked the jury. But that's all right. I'm in no hurry."

"Well, I am." The monarch spread his hands out at his eager people. "Guilty, eh?"

"Oh, sure!"

"Guilty ten times over!"

"His crimes show in his face, every one of them!"

"Hooray for Just King Polydectes!"

Just King Polydectes beamed.

"Thank you, my friends, thank you. Now, as for the sentencing—"

Percy leaped to his feet. "What kind of a trial is this anyway?" he raged. "You might give a man a chance for his life!"

KING POLYDECTES shook his head in amazement. He leaned forward to stare at Percy closely, almost squashing a feminine footstool who had just begun to stretch. He was as large as his brother but, since his waist competed burstingly with his height, the effect was overpowering. Also, while most of the people on the island—male and female—seemed to dress in a negligent sheepskin or sagging loincloth, the two royal brothers wore richly dyed woolen garments and the king sported what must once have been a clean tunic of the finest linen.

"I don't know what's upset you, young fellow, but you've had all the chance for your life that the laws of Seriphos allow. Now, why don't you be quiet about it and take your punishment like a man?"

"Listen, please listen!" Percy begged. "Not only am I not a citizen of Seriphos, but I'm not even a citizen of this world. All I want is the chance of finding a way back, practically anything that—"

"That's the whole point," the king explained. "Our laws are not made for citizens—at least not the ones about cooking over a slow fire. Citizens who go wrong get thrown off cliffs or strangled outside the walls at high noon, things like that. Only non-citizens get punished this way.

This is how I keep my people happy to be under my rule. Now do you understand? Let's not have any more trouble, huh? Let's be grown-up about paying the penalty for our crimes."

Percy grabbed at his hair, pulled out an exasperated clump and jumped on it. "Look, the way this whole thing started—I won't begin with Mrs. Danner—it's impossible, insane to stand here and watch what— Just a minute." He took a deep breath, conscious of the necessity to remain calm, to be very, very persuasive—to be, above all, *reasonable*. "There was a slight misunderstanding when I met your brother. A sea-serpent—" he paused for a moment, took a deep breath and went on "—an honest-to-gosh real sea-serpent came up to me in my—in my floating chest and welcomed me as the son of Danae. So when I was asked by Dictys who I was—"

"You needn't go on," Polydectes advised him. "The testimony of a sea-serpent is not admissible evidence."

"I was not talking—"

"What I mean is, it's not admissible evidence from the sea-serpent himself. So it certainly is not admissible when you repeat it to us."

"All I was trying to say—"

"Of course," the king stuck out his lower lip and nodded his head thoughtfully, "if it was a land serpent, it might be a little different matter."

PERCY PAUSED in the midst of a frantic peroration, intrigued in spite of himself. "It would?" he asked curiously.

"Certainly. Depending on the exact type of land serpent. The oracular type, now, we'd certainly listen to what a pythoness has to say with a good deal of respect. Or the very intelligent and friendly walking kind the legends tell about. But none of this applies to you. You're charged with impersonating Perseus and circulating the impression that you have

the courage to kill the Gorgon. For such a crime, a sea-serpent is no good as a character witness. Besides, you've already been found guilty."

"I'm not even arguing with the idea that—"

"Dictys," the king said with a gesture of infinite weariness. "Rule him out of order."

An enormous fist came down on the top of Perseus' head. He felt as if his brains had been rammed down his nostrils. When he could see clearly again through the reddish haze, he was grabbing at the floor which seemed to be curling away from him.

"I don't see why we can't have two executions the same day," Dictys was saying angrily. "Both of these men claimed to be Perseus. As you said, we've having a regular rash of this impersonation lately. Well, a good way to discourage it would be a slam-bang double cooking. A sort of two-course execution. All you have to do is pass sentence on him now, let me attend to details like getting a slave to clean the pot between acts, and—"

"Who's king around here, me or you?" Polydectes roared.

"Oh, you are, you are. But—"

"No buts. You're just a grand duke and don't you forget it, Dictys. Now, I say we'll have just one execution tonight, the man who was caught first. Then tomorrow, we'll have this man in for an official sentencing. It'll give me another excuse to have a throne-room reception, which I like, and will insure that we'll all have something to keep us cheerful on another night."

"All right," Dictys said morosely. "But how many times does it happen that we get two stew-jobs on the same day?"

"All the more reason for spreading them out over a period of time," the king insisted. "Guards, take this man away! You see, Dictys, the way I feel about it is—waste not, want not."

And that, Percy thought bitterly as two huskies with hands like iron claws

began dragging him out of the pillared chamber, that's why they call him Philosophical King Polydectes!

AT THE end of the hall, a grate was abruptly lifted from the floor and he was dropped into the hole like a handful of garbage. The hole was deep enough to knock him out again.

He managed to roll over on his back after a while, nursing his bruises with aching arms. Whatever else was the matter with it—and that came to a good deal!—this was certainly the least gentle of possible worlds.

There was a little light slanting in from the grate. He started to stagger over to it, to get a somewhat better idea of his cell. Something hit him in the stomach and he sat down again.

"You just try that again, mister," a girl's soft voice told him in definite accents, "and I'll really wreck you."

"I beg your pardon?" Percy asked the dead gloom stupidly.

"Don't worry about my pardon. You just stay on your side of the cell and I'll stay on mine. I've had all I want or am going to take of loose-fingered guys who want to find out how much of what a girl has where and don't think twice of finding out right away. I never saw such a place!" Her voice had been riding up the scale with every word; when she came to the last one, she began crying.

After thinking the matter over carefully, Percy started to crawl in the direction of the sobs. "See here..." he began gently.

This time she hit him in the eye.

Cursing more fluently than he had ever known he could, he moved to the opposite wall and sat down against it with sternly folded arms. After a while, however, the bitterness got to be too much for silence. He began by cursing the entire human race, limited it to women in general and, after a nod at the girl across from him, he concentrated on Mrs. Danner. He put so much feeling into the business that

his maledictions became surprisingly expert, almost worthy of an ecclesiastical body discussing one of their number who had started a campaign to practice the principles of their mutual religion.

He suddenly felt the girl's wet face nuzzling against his shoulder. He leaped into the corner. "Let me tell you, lady," he almost spat out, "that I don't want to touch you any more than—"

"You just mentioned Mrs. Danner's name," she said. "I heard you. Apartment 18-K?"

"Right! But how..." Slowly the answer dawned on him. "Oh, you're an alumnus too!"

"I'll kill that woman!" she said through clenched teeth. "The first day I was here, I said I'd beat every dollar bill and every shot of whiskey that she enjoyed on my money out of her if I ever got back. The second day, I said if I only got back I wouldn't pay any attention to her, I'd be so busy kissing things like city sidewalks and big six-foot cops and plumbing equipment. The third day, I didn't think of her at all, I was so busy trying to remember what it was like in the city. But today I know I'm not going back, not ever, so all I do is pray that somehow I will figure out a way of killing her, that somehow—"

She began crying again, great gusty sobs that sounded as if her shoulders were being torn out of place.

VERY, VERY gingerly, the young man returned to her side and patted her on the back. After a while, he took her in his arms and caressed her face gently. Some terribly rough garment she was wearing irritated his own scratched skin.

"It could be worse," he assured her, although privately he wondered what miracle would be necessary to achieve

that state. "It could be a lot worse, believe me. Meanwhile, we've found each other. Things won't be nearly so bad with someone to talk to. We're compatriots or comtimeriots or something. My name's Percy S. Yuss. The 'S' stands for Sacrist. I used to own half of a restaurant that our creditors owned two-thirds of. Who are you?"

"Anita Drummond," she said, straightening with a slightly self-conscious giggle and wiping her eyes with her peculiar dress. "Ann. I used to be a ballet dancer. Or, rather, I was still studying to be one, getting a little work here and there. That apartment was a godsend. It just fitted my budget. I plumped myself down in the one chair the place had and gloried in a home at last! Then I noticed a piece of parchment on the floor with some poetry on it. I started to read it, stopped, and then began to doze with my eyes on the words. When I woke, I was halfway up a plowed hillside, the chair didn't have any legs, and some old peasant and his wife were saying spells over me to make me vanish before I put a charm on their crops. As soon as they saw me open my eyes, they both jumped on my head, tied me down and carried me into their hut. And they wouldn't listen to a word I had to say! Uh—by the way, if you want to—to be a little more presentable, there's a pile of castoff clothes in that corner there."

Percy ambled over and found a half-dozen badly worn sheepskin tunics. He selected one which smelled strongly but seemed to have fewer inhabitants than the others, and came back. Somehow, wearing clothes again helped restore his confidence. He hadn't had much opportunity to think about the various aspects of nudism since his arrival sans wardrobe in this thoroughly mad world, but he felt for the first time that there was a possibil-

ity of outwitting his captors now that he was dressed almost as well as they.

ANN CONTINUED her story. She was describing how all the inhabitants of a village on the far side of the island had been called into a conference on methods of disposing of the witch.

"There was a real tug-of-war going on between the drive-a-stake-into-her-and-be-done-with-it school and the burn - her - and - then - only - then - can - you - be - sure faction, when a seneschal or chamberlain or whatever he was of King Polydectes court happened to pass by. He was out hunting some small monsters. Furies, I think. Or perhaps they were Sirens. He saw me and before any of the village could say anything, he—Percy, look!"

He jerked his head around to follow her pointing finger. Dusk had been sliding down over the grating at a steeper and steeper incline. There was little more than the most delicate of rosy glows from a sun which had done more than its share of shining and wanted only to rest.

There was a man's head on the other side of the grating. His fingers pressed hard upon his lips. Percy nodded to show that he understood. Slowly the man faded, like smoke dissipating under a gentle summer breeze. Then he was gone.

But the grate lifted slowly, silently, and closed again in a moment. Percy had the eerie sensation of something very heavy that was floating down in the lazy circles that a feather would assume. Without thinking about it, he covered Ann's mouth with his own hand. Even so, her gasp was almost audible when, abruptly, a man wearing a suit vaguely reminiscent of renaissance Italy appeared before them.

He made an adjustment on the extremely thick metal-studded belt he

wore, gave them the slightest inclination of his head by way of greeting, and said: "My name is Hermes."

Ann removed Percy's hand from her mouth. "Hermes!" she whispered. "The messenger of the gods!"

"Exactly."

The smile came and went so fast on that aristocratic face that Percy was not quite sure it had ever been. He stared closely at the man's visible skin in the almost non-existent light. It looked golden. "Weren't you the fellow in the white mantle who disappeared when Dictys began asking you questions?"

HERMES NODDED. "I suspected who you were, but I had to check on the so-called chest before I could be sure. I could hardly ask you questions while you were surrounded by that mob."

"What questions?" Percy asked eagerly.

"Questions which would determine whether you were the rightful Perseus, the legendary hero who is to save the world from the Gorgon race."

"Look, mister, that stuff has me in enough hot water already! My name is Percy S. Yuss. I am not the son of Danae—we never even had a Daniel in the family anywhere. I don't know this Gorgon everyone keeps raving about all the time and, if I did, I certainly wouldn't feel like killing her. I have nothing against any Gorgon, or any man—except for that fat old slob of king—"

"You're speaking too loudly," the other warned. "It's not any Gorgon we send you against—it's Medusa herself!" His voice dropped almost to inaudibility at the name. "I spoke to Professor Gray and described the articles with which you had arrived, and he agreed that you must be a man of his own time."

"You mean there's someone else here from the twentieth century?"

Ann asked eagerly.

"Where is he? In trouble too?" Percy inquired. He was slightly bitter.

The stranger smiled. This one was long and slow, and Percy decided he didn't like it any better than the fast take. "No, he's not in trouble. He's waiting for you to give you advice on how best to conquer the Gorgon."

"Well, he'll have to run pretty far and awfully fast. I don't like the way everyone jumps when they mention that character. I don't feel like a hero and I don't intend to be one. I've been a sucker all my life, always taking somebody else's falls, but this is one that my mother's favorite son is not going to take."

"Not even to avoid the stew-pot tomorrow?"

Percy swallowed. He'd forgotten the trial according to the laws of Scriphos since he had met Ann. Yes. There'd be another evening like this one, and then he'd be led out—

Could any risk he'd run be greater than the horrible certainty he faced in twenty-four hours? He'd seen enough of these ancient Greeks to have developed a very healthy respect for their deadly efficiency in the prosecution of what they considered to be criminal cases. It was very doubtful, for example, that these people had developed the institution of appeal, or parole....

"Not even," Hermes went on, picking each word up carefully with his teeth and holding it out for them to see, "not even for the chance to return to your own time?"

Ann squealed and the messenger of the gods sternly told her to be quiet. He jerked at his belt, went invisible. After a while, he turned back on. When he rematerialized, he was staring anxiously up at the grating, one hand poised over his belt.

IT STRUCK Percy that this fellow was pretty nervous for a supposed deity. It also struck him that he was being offered just what he needed im-

mediately and most desperately wanted. Did the price he had to pay sound too high? That was silly. Whatever he had to do would be worth the risk and difficulty, if somehow he could find himself back in his own era. Not to mention the desirable aspects of getting out of his present surroundings before supper-time tomorrow.

"I'll do it," he said finally. "Whatever it is you want done, I'll do it. Only listen. Any bargain I made applies to this girl as well as to me."

"Done!" The golden one held out a thin pouch. "Take this. When they lead you to execution tomorrow—"

"Hey! I thought you were going to get us out of this jam. Why can't you just take us with you?"

Hermes shook his head violently. He seemed to be extremely interested in moving on as soon as possible. "Because I can't. You don't have the— the powers. Do what I tell you and you'll be all right."

"Listen to him, Percy!" Ann urged. "This is our only chance. Let's do it his way. Besides, he's a god. He must know his way around this mythological world."

Again Hermes smiled that quick-flitting smile. "When they take you out, make a long speech—as long as you can—about how sorry they are going to be. Whatever it is they're going to have you fight—"

"I'm not going to fight anything," Percy insisted. "I'm going to be—"

"Cooked over a slow fire. I know! But believe me, trust me, you will be led out to fight somebody or something. You make your speech and while you're talking, without anyone seeing you, you dip your hand under your garment and into this pouch. Start fondling the kernels you find there, squeeze them, rub them back and forth between the palm of your hand and the fabric of the pouch. When they start to squirm and move about of their own, get sent in and start fighting as soon as possible! All you do then is to scatter them on the

ground all around you—and stand back! Get back as far as—”

He stopped and ripped at the switch on his belt. A torch appeared on the other side of the grating and two heavily whiskered men peered in.

“Could have sworn I saw something,” one of them said.

“Well, you can call the guard out and go down to look into it,” the other one announced. “Me for the party.”

The torchbearer straightened. “Me too. If I saw what I thought I did, I don’t want to look into it! Let the morning watch do it.”

OUT OF THE darkness came the pouch and pushed itself into Percy’s hand. “Remember,” they heard the whisper ascending slowly. “Don’t start rubbing those kernels too early—and don’t wait too long either. Once they begin moving, you’ve got to get into the fight fast.”

The grate lifted briefly, came down again. There was a final whispered injunction: “And don’t look into the pouch tonight! Don’t even think of touching it until just before you have to!”

They felt a presence departing stealthily above them. Ann moved closer to Percy and he squeezed her reassuringly.

“A big list of don’ts,” he grumbled. “Time it just right, but don’t try to find out what it is! It’s like taking a Frenchman up to a row of medicine bottles labeled in Chinese and warning him to take some aspirin before his fever goes up any further, but not to touch the sleeping tablets because they’re strong enough to kill him. What does he think I am?”

Ann leaned on him, chuckling with a slight edge of hysteria. “Do you know, Percy, this is the first, absolutely the first ray of hope I’ve seen since coming to this awful world? And you’re grumbling because the directions aren’t so clear!”

“Well, after all,” his mind said logically—but privately!—“I’m the one

who’s going to have to fight the Gorgon!”

“I’m not really complaining,” he said aloud as they sat down. “But confused directions irritate me. I always feel I’m being taken for a ride.”

“Think of sitting in a restaurant,” she murmured dreamily. “Or a hairdresser’s. Think of going to those chic little dress shops along the Avenue and feeling all those wonderful fabrics and imagining yourself in all those lovely new styles. And all the time making believe that you’re really fooling the sales girl into believing you have enough money to buy them. And any time a man you don’t like makes a pass at you, you can make him stop. And if he doesn’t stop, you yell, and when you yell, you get help instead of him. Oh, civilization, *civilization!*”

She was asleep in his arms. Percy patted her tenderly and prepared to go to sleep himself. He’d had a long, tiring day. Long? Just three thousand years or so!

Unfortunately, he hadn’t fallen completely asleep when the execution started. Being underground somewhat and a good distance away, he couldn’t see very much. But a good deal of the noise carried. . . .

IT WAS QUITE a few hours before he finally dozed off and stopped thinking about the man who had come charging down a hillside insisting he was Perseus. How many Perseus’ were there in this world? It looked almost as if someone wanted the Gorgon killed very badly indeed and was sending in a good many pinch-hitters.

Who was the real Perseus? He didn’t know, but it struck him then that he did know he wasn’t. And he was the only one committed so far to killing the Gorgon. What, exactly, was the Gorgon? That was another good question. . . .

Their cell had a third occupant by morning. Agesilaus.

“What did you do?” Percy asked

him as he stretched painfully.

"Nothing," the old man said. He sat against the wall hunting for lice in his beard. Every time he caught one, he grinned and cracked it noisily between his teeth. "I'm here because of my brother."

"What do you mean because of your brother?"

"He committed high treason last night and had his brains knocked out according to the law the king made up a few minutes after he committed it. The king was still pretty sore, though, so he passed another law making all blood relatives co-responsible in cases of high treason. I was the only blood relative, so here I am. I'm due to get my brains knocked out today."

"Good old 'waste not, want not' Polydectes," Percy mused. "What kind of high treason did your brother commit that the king had to pass a law covering it?"

Agesilaus pored through the bottom tattered fringes of his beard. From the obvious disappointment with which he put them aside, it was clear that he considered them devoid of life. "Well, sir, my brother was the royal chef. So of course he was also the public executioner. Somewhere along the line, he must have made a mistake last night. He probably forgot to grease it properly. Because after the execution, the great cooking pot cracked."

"Cracked? You mean they can't use it any more?"

"That's just what I do mean. Broke open like a nut. Ah, you can smile, but let me tell you—that pot was the pride of Seriphos! It wasn't made of bronze or silver or gold, but—and I don't ask you to believe this—of pure *iron*! Yes, sir, this whole island wouldn't be wealthy enough to buy another pot like that. Years and years it took, in my great-grandfather's day, melting down those little meteors that our people had been collecting for generations. And at that they say it was

one of the walking reptiles that finally did the casting. Do you blame King Polydectes for getting mad at my brother and all his kith and kin? I don't. Why; his predecessor, King Aurion—the one Polydectes stabbed in the back at the feast of the summer solstice—Aurion would have extended the penalties to relatives by marriage and most of the criminal's close friends."

PERCY SAT musing on Hermes' prediction of the night before. In all probability, it was not so much an example of accurate prophecy as a clear case of sabotage. He chuckled. Well, at least that particular fear was no longer to be lived with!

"What were these walking reptiles?" Ann asked. She'd been sitting quietly by Percy's side all through his interrogation of the old man, and had pressed his hand when he chuckled to show that she too was hoping that the rest of Hermes' promises would be realized.

"That's a hard question to answer," Agesilaus said slowly. "They must have died off completely forty, fifty years ago. In my great-grandfather's day, there were very few of them left, and they got fewer all the time. They were like the pythonesses who work with the oracles or some of the friendlier sea-serpents. But they were smarter than any of them. And they had legs—some say they even had arms—and they walked about and performed wonders. Taught us how to make pottery, my grandfather told me, and how to—"

"Hey, Agesilaus!"

They all looked up to see the rope ladder come twirling down into the cell. The burly man at the top gestured impatiently to the new arrival. "Time for boom-boom. Hurry up, will you? There's going to be a bull-baiting this afternoon and we have to clear up the arena."

"Their lives are certainly one mad

round of pleasure," Ann said bitterly to Percy. "Something doing all the time!"

"Don't misunderstand us," the old man pleaded as he began to mount the ladder. "We have entirely too many people on this island and there haven't been any wars or serious pestilences for over two generations now. What better way to cut down our numbers than by interesting executions? Polydectes calls this 'Population Control with a Smile.'"

"He would," Percy muttered. "That's why we call him Humorous King Polydectes."

LATER, HE was ordered up the rope ladder in his turn and sentenced to combat in the theater with such monsters as would be made available by the zoo superintendent. Polydectes was evidently too morose to develop much interest even in the throne-room reception which a sentencing made inevitable. He lounged sideways on his concubine-infested seat, scowling at the wall, while a court official lackadaisically informed Percy of what he was to expect.

He was sitting thoughtfully in the execution ante-chamber touching the pouch under his sheepskin tunic from time to time, when Ann was hurled in.

"Monster-bait too," she nodded at him. "They're going to send us in together. Let us hope and pray that Hermes knows what he's talking about."

"How come you're under sentence too? What did you do? Not that you can't be tossed into Condemned Row for just making the serious error of being alive."

"Well, you see, I was brought here originally from the other side of the island to become a part of Polydectes' harem."

"How did you get out of that?"

"I didn't get out of it. I'm afraid I just didn't make the grade. The king said I wasn't pneumatic enough. Although," she added with a vicious snap of her teeth, "I still think it was

that jealous cat Tontibbi that poisoned his mind against me. Oh no, you don't have to look so startled, Percy," she laughed. "I didn't want to be a member of that harem at all. But it kind of hurts a girl's feelings to be told she's not good enough, when she sees all kinds of fat and sloppy creatures positively infesting the place!" She curled up beside him, still fuming.

In the late afternoon, they were given a handful of dried fruits and, while they were still munching this highly uninteresting supper, were ordered out for execution.

PERCY WAS intrigued to see Ann for the first time in daylight. He noted with approving interest that she was one of those rare and perfect blondes whose skin is so magnificently clear as to neutralize the brightness of her hair into an over-all glow of fairness which yet leaves rich hints of darker tones and deeper wells of personality beneath.

They clasped hands as they marched along a constantly curving lane that meandered around the hill on the far side of the citadel. It came eventually to a collection of stone buildings that was obviously the zoo. They were hurried past this, both of them quite happy to be moving fast after a hurried glimpse of what the cages contained. They found themselves in a small valley formed by several tiny hills.

There were seats carved out of the soil of the hills; most of these were already filled. Percy was almost certain he saw Hermes in one of the seats. At the bottom of the valley an area had been surrounded by a high stone wall. There were ponderous gates on either side.

Ann and Percy were alternately pushed and led to one of these gates which was tended by a pair of jumpy youths who held it slightly ajar. Percy nervously reached for the hidden pouch. Everyone was waiting for the king.

He arrived finally, accompanied by his twittering retinue. "Let the punishment proceed," he said in a flat, tired voice. It was evident that he expected little of life now that the execution pot was gone.

Percy dipped his left hand into the pouch as a green-coated bronze sword was shoved into his right. The two boys started to pull the gates back. "I think you'd better start," Ann whispered.

He nodded. "O mighty King Polydectes of Seriphos!" he howled so suddenly that one of the youths dropped his door-ring and turned to run. The Captain of the Guard pushed him back sternly. "I beg and implore you to grant me one last favor." The *kernels* were disagreeably soft to the touch.

Polydectes waved a hand unhappily. "If it's reasonable. And if you can tell me in just a few more or less well-chosen words." He leaned back irritably.

Grinding the soft little bits slowly between his fingers and against the fabric of the pouch. Percy wondered how, where, to begin. Suddenly he smiled.

"You are probably wondering whether what happened to your execution pot yesterday was an accident, or whether some discontented subject was responsible for destroying the glory of Seriphos. I alone know the answer, and my request hinges on that."

"He's hooked!" Ann whispered delightedly. "Perfect, Percy, perfect!" A buzz of excitement had ripped up and down the theater's earthen rows.

"Well," the young man went on, massaging and squeezing inside the pouch as if he were a prizefighter trying to build up the powers of his fist, "let us examine what probably happened in terms of the basic function of the pot—cooking. What do we know of the effects of previous ingredients upon the structure of the

pot? Do we know anything."

THE KING looked confused and anxious at the same time, as if he felt that Percy had made a very important point but didn't know precisely what he had made it out of. Even the guards who surrounded them had the half-thrilled, half-frightened appearance of men who believe they stand on the brink of tremendous revelation. Percy was not quite certain whether he had felt a ripple of life on his fingertips; he decided, after a moment of waiting, that he hadn't, and continued rolling *non sequiturs*:

"Well, first of all we have sandwiches. On the menu, made to order and to go. We have various kinds of cheese sandwiches. Grilled cheese, cheese and tomato, cheese and bacon, cheese and ham. We can grill them together or separately."

He stopped as he felt a few of the tiny little lumps begin to curl around his fingers.

"If what you're trying to tell me," the king said slowly and intently, "is that my people have been illegally using the state execution pot for grilling cheese and tomato—"

"I'm not trying to tell you anything," Percy said curtly. "Let's get on with the execution."

"No, listen son," Polydectes said warmly, "you were making sense. It was a little hard to follow, but you had a good solid point there. Somewhere, anyway. Please go on."

"Yes, do go on," one of the spectators called out. "I can understand you."

"There's nothing to understand!" He was feeling desperate. The *kernels* were leaping about in the pouch like tiny frogs frightened out of their pond. "I have nothing to tell you. I made everything up. I just wanted a delay. Now will you go on with the execution?"

"We will not!" the king said portentously. "You're trying to protect

somebody. Somebody important."

The little writhing bits were now grouped at the mouth of the pouch, burrowing out to freedom. Percy looked at Ann's anxious face, saw that she understood his predicament but had no way to help him.

"Listen, Polydectes," he said hoarsely. "Why don't you give the throne to someone who's deserved it from away back? Tontibbi would make a better ruler several times over. Not only is she smarter than you, not only does she know more about civilized living, but she also—"

"Open those gates," roared Purple King Polydectes, "and throw him to the beast!"

THE GREAT portals creaked back. Ann and Percy were pushed out into the enormous sweep of stone floor. Ann managed to keep her balance, but Percy, thrown off by the arm he had been keeping under his tunic where the pouch lay against his breast, staggered forward unable to lift his head and regain his equilibrium. He tripped and came crashing down on one hand and one knee, his sword ringing on the flagstone as it spun out of his grip.

He heard Ann scream in disbelief and looked up. Racing toward them from the other gate was something that belonged on an insane artist's drawing board and nowhere else.

Waist-high it was, but over twelve feet wide, a weirdly fused conglomeration of canine, lupine, reptile, human and something else, something, Percy immediately felt, that this planet had never bred. The thing ran on the bodies of snakes, lizards, dogs and wolves, all of them seemingly independent living entities and all of them nonetheless joined to the main body by thick trunk-like appendages which took the place of their hind ends. Six distinct heads the thing had, each of them, including the human one, with dripping jaw thrown wide

open and screaming an unrecognizable counterpoint to each other.

It was moving terribly fast. Percy leaped to his feet and, withdrawing the handful of writhing lumps from the pouch, darted toward the terrified girl.

He pulled her behind him before making his throw. A gaping crocodile mouth which had been wavering toward them was abruptly withdrawn as one of the bites fell upon it. Percy managed to throw them in a rough semi-circle, then, pushing Ann ahead, stumbling, bouncing against her and running in crazy zig-zags because of the looks he kept throwing over his shoulder, he made it to the opposite wall.

They stood awed at the destruction they had let loose.

The little lumps had been kernels all right. But of such plants as only the most unholy gardener could have sown!

WHEREVER THE seeds touched a surface, they grew—grew luxuriantly! And in a matter of seconds had put forth on their sickly white stems elephant-sized white flowers covered with irregular purple blobs. Their roots tore into and through the surface contacted like streams of flood water irresistibly seeking their way. Tremendously hungry the roots had to be to support such fantastic growth in the rest of the plant and tremendously hungry they were. Whatever they touched died on the spot—flesh grew bloodless, normal plants turned yellow with sudden age and lack of chlorophyll, the very stone flaked and crumbled into fine dust under the probing requisitions of the sprouting root hairs.

They grew, these seeds, with the maintained momentum and direction in which Percy had thrown them. They reproduced by means of single new seeds virtually expectorated ahead by each fruitful flower.

The monster, which had turned to

run, was engulfed in mid-stride and dropped in a moment—a pallid husk. The walls of the stadium, too—those on the side at which Percy had thrown the seeds—were powdered ruins in a moment. And the entire audience, after a horrified moment of half-understanding, had risen and fled before this botanical juggernaut.

They could have stayed. It hardly reached the top rows.

Almost, it seemed, a moment after it had started to live, it became moribund. It was as if, tremendously hungry of life, it could find in this place or this world no life on which to feed, nothing whose constitution was what it needed to sustain itself. By the time



that the forward blossoms were plunging open among the rapidly emptied seats, their ancestors of seconds ago on the stadium floor had turned a brittle black and begun to fall apart.

In a few minutes, except for the transparent outline of the monster lying near the dissolved gate which it had been vainly trying to regain, and the completely disintegrated length of wall over which the blossoms had passed, there was no sign of the weapon which Hermes had given Percy. A thin grey fog wandered away blindly—and that was all.

There was the abrupt sound of heels striking the ground. They turned. Hermes appeared, a slightly mocking smile on his expertly carved face.

"Well?" he asked. "Was that satis-

factorily efficient, Perseus?"

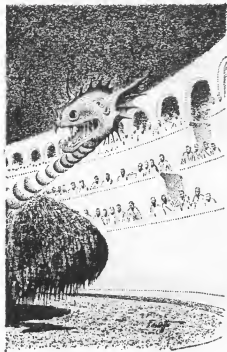
"My name is Percy," the young man told him shortly. "And with that kind of power I don't see why you don't go after the Gorgon yourself."

"Your name, for the duration of this bargain, my friend, is Perseus as far as the Olympians are concerned. With regard to power," he shrugged, "there are many different kinds. Some so old that they can be conquered only at the cost of universal destruction. Some so new," he smiled brilliantly at the two of them, "that their scope cannot as yet even be estimated. And there is the power of a legend which says a truth that must be fulfilled before the days of a world can further unwind." He nodded, in what seemed to be a prodigious self-satisfaction. "Now, if you two would kindly clasp my waist from either side, we can go on."

THE THOUGHT occurred to Percy that he was remarkably cool and chipper away from the dungeons of King Polydectes. The touch of aristocratic insolence in his manner was much deeper now than it had been the previous night when he had broken it frequently to gnaw a nervous lip at the grating above. With weapons such as he had at his disposal, why should he worry about the soldiers of a monarch as petty as Polydectes?

Could it be because the weapons were very limited in quantity and could be used only for emergencies—or to make such important bargains with people like himself as the Olympians deemed necessary? And why was it necessary to make bargains with a master hash-slinger like Percy S. Yuss? For all of Hermes' chatter about different kinds of power, it still seemed much more logical for the Olympians to knock off Medusa themselves than to provide an ordinary human with the weapons to do it.

If they could provide the weapons



to do it. If they could...

He shook his head in bewilderment and grabbed Hermes' waist as Ann had already done, his arms overlapping hers. The golden one flexed his shoulders for a moment, then touched the belt lightly.

They rose, not abruptly, but with the steady insistence of a warm up-draft. At two or three hundred feet, Hermes made another adjustment and began skinning south at a fair rate of speed. It wasn't difficult to maintain a grip and, since the late day was extremely mellow, this particular kind of flight was very enjoyable. Percy and Ann smiled, "Fun, isn't it?" at each other.

"This is some kind of anti-gravity belt, isn't it?" Percy asked.

Hermes gave him a brief, cold glance. "Don't ask such questions!" he said with the insulting emphasis of an order. He flexed his shoulders again and stared straight ahead.

Percy bit his lip. He definitely didn't like this character....

They came down on a little peninsula on the southern tip of Seriphos. There, beside a long rock-like shelf that overhung the sea, was a small and neat hut built of driftwood. After separating themselves from Hermes, the two stood uncertainly on the path for a moment.

"Professor Gray," called out the golden man. "Your fellow-tourists!"

A highly energetic little old man dressed in a grey flannel suit came prancing out of the hut. "Hello, hello!" he said chirpingly. "Come inside, please do. I've been waiting quite a while for you, young fellow. Thank you very much Hermes, you'll be back tomorrow?"

"If we can get the boots working right." The messenger shot up and away at several times the speed he had used in bringing them there.

PROFESSOR GRAY took a hand of each and hauled them into his hut. "Now, sit down and make yourselves

comfortable. Dinner will be ready in a moment." He indicated a full-bellied pot bubbling in the fireplace. Percy, remembering another such pot and noticing the resemblance in all but size, smiled wryly.

"What is it?" the other man asked. Despite his age, he had the quick gestures of a highly nervous sparrow. "What are you brooding about? You must tell me all your adventures, both of you."

So they did. All through dinner.

"I'm sorry. Truly sorry." Professor Gray had his hands shoved deeply into his pockets. "I had no idea—no idea at all—that my little experiment would be dragging fellow humans into such misery. My deepest apologies to both of you, especially the young lady," he asserted self-consciously. "And I certainly didn't intend to present Mrs. Danner with the equivalent of a lifetime pension."

"What little experiment?" Percy asked curiously.

"You mean to tell us that you were the first one through?" Ann asked, her eyes very wide.

"I'm afraid I mean just that." The little man walked bouncingly up and down the length of the small hut. "You see, when I retired as Head of the Classics Department at the University, I rented that apartment as a sort of laboratory. I felt it was the place where I might try some experiments with my theories of subjective time-travel, theories based more upon the ancient Greek philosophers than on our modern mathematicians. There, I thought I'd be alone, safe at least from ridicule. The only thing I didn't anticipate quite so early was my success! Simply because it is a period about which little is known by our archaeologists, I fixed my psyche during the experiment upon the time of the *older heroes*, so called. For the purpose, I used a poem by Pindar, written nine centuries after the period

in which I was interested. I copied an English translation of the poem on a piece of sheepskin, to create greater subjective verisimilitude. I didn't have any warning, either, the day I sat down to try just another experiment in mental control of time."

HE GRINNED at them, gestured with both palms. "Much to my surprise, I—well, I fell in! I was more fortunate than either of you in that I had a plentiful supply of silver and copper coins when I arrived in the southern, less densely populated half of the island. It was inevitable that I should arrive in Seriphos, by the way, because of the poem celebrating Perseus' return here after he had acquired the Gorgon's head that I had used as a psychic time-travel tie. I was able to develop a reputation as a kind of beneficent local wizard through my knowledge of the people and the time. And I've done fairly well for a scholar most of whose adult life has been spent in other places than the press and scramble of business; I own this hut and a substantial tract of productive land. By the standards of this community, I am quite a wealthy man.

"But there is my greatest compensation here—the close, on-the-spot study of a period which has always fascinated me. I place it, by the way, somewhere between the end of the Mycenaean and the beginning of the Achaeon eras of Greek history. Roughly 1400 B.C. It was a remarkable time in that, while superstition flourished, religion—important both before and after this period—was almost nonexistent. Some scholars even claim—"

"Pardon me, sir," Percy broke in, "but how did we come to follow you?"

"I think the answer is obvious. The parchment, containing the English translation of the poem which served

me as a kind of target, was still in the apartment. So, therefore, was my subjective aura. And there had also been created what might be called a psycho-chronological hole in the place through which I had fallen. You young people were unfortunate enough to read the poem under these conditions and therefore followed me, arriving more or less in my neighborhood, depending on personality differences in relation to the psycho-chronological hole. I think the apartment should be fairly safe now, since Percy had the parchment in his hand when he arrived and dropped it in the Aegean Sea."

"And here we are," Percy mused. "In the world of Greek mythology."

Professor Gray shook his head emphatically. "I beg your pardon, but we most definitely are not. There never was such a place! It's entirely a world in Man's imagination. You are in a time that is to give rise to what we call Greek mythology. The actual events in this era will be the religion and mythos of the next. What form exactly they will take, I cannot say, since this is not our world nor our universe."

"What do you mean?" Percy's question was fringed with sudden panic.

"I MEAN THAT you aren't in the past at all. You are in the future, uncountable eons in the future! This is the formative period of Greek mythology on another Earth, in a space-time universe which came into being only after our own grew senile and died. Much the same things are happening to it and on it as happened to our own planet hut, since it is not the same Earth, the results tend to be more and more different."

"The—the future?" Ann shook her head as if to clear it of accumulating webs. "Another space-time universe?"

"Is it really so hard to understand or believe? It isn't possible to travel backwards in time, only ahead of one's era. The past, having died, is dead forever: only the future is constantly unrolling. Since I hurled myself into this particular period which, being in the past, had ceased to exist, I inevitably materialized in a parallel period in the succeeding cosmos. The ancient philosopher Anaximander of Miletus was one of the first to discuss the concept of an *Indefinite-Infinite* from which all things were drawn, including primordial atoms and planetary systems, super-galaxies and even time-streams. There is birth and death in all things, said Anaximander, and they perish into those from which they have been born. Thus there were Earths in space-time universes which existed long before our own and, barring unexpected developments in Anaximander's Indefinite-Infinite, there will be Earths in many, many succeeding space-time universes."

"And in each one," Percy muttered slowly as he began to understand. "In each one, another Perseus."

"Right!" Professor Gray beamed. "Except that he does not necessarily do the same things in the same way each time. But enough of this metaphysics! You young people are exhausted: suppose I show you to your beds. You begin a training program tomorrow, Percy—you, especially, will need your sleep."

He led Ann up a ladder into a narrow bedroom in the loft which, after her recent accommodations, she found magnificent. Percy and he bedded down near the fireplace on a soft pile of skins.

"Look, professor," Percy asked as the older man extinguished the torch, "if this isn't a world of actual mythology, then those habies aren't really gods and monsters. Yet, I saw a monster in the arena which I'd like

to forget for the sake of my dreams, and I can remember other things which are even harder to explain."

"Of course. And if that thing—it was a scylla, by the way—had caught you— But while they are real, painfully so, they don't come from our universe at all."

"How's that?"

"There are universes which adjoin ours in the plenum. Every possible type of universe exists parallel with ours. Many of them have Earth-type planets and Sol-type suns positioned in their space to correspond with ours. Well, it happens that the sub-spatial fabric separating these universes from each other is understandably weak in their youth and grows progressively stronger as the ages pass. At one time, there was probably a constant exchange and pilgrimage of individuals taking place from one universe's 'Earth' to another. Right now, it is down in all probability to the barest of trickles as the sub-spatial fabric has solidified and lets little through in any place. In a little while, it will have closed or clotted completely and all that will be left will be the memories of strange unearthly creatures to generate beautiful legends and peculiar superstitions."

PERCY GRUNTED as he chewed into the strange texture of this information. "Then the gods aren't gods at all, I guess, but what I heard one of the men who captured me call them: Olympian monsters."

"Well, yes. Monsters, in the sense that they are nonhuman intrinsically since they evolved on a different world. But, Percy, they are very like us in so many ways! They are much more advanced scientifically at this point than is our race, and they can't be as confusingly horrible in their thought processes—no matter how

bad they might get!—as—well, the Gorgon race for example. These creatures are humanoid: they therefore must come from a world and universe whose natural laws are much like our own: and they are very much interested in helping humanity advance to their level. The people of this time call them Olympian monsters, by the way, because in our world they originate upon Mount Olympus in Northern Thessaly.

"I owe the one called Hermes a good deal: if it hadn't been for his help, I wouldn't have nearly a third of the wealth and knowledge I do. He sought me out shortly after I arrived and insisted on doing all sorts of useful little favors. I'll admit to feeling the same sort of distrust for a while which, I can see, you are experiencing. But believe me, it will be washed away by the fellow's ubiquitous friendliness! I just can't understand why later myths gave him the character of a mischievous schemer! Of course, it's entirely possible that the myths which will evolve in this world will be greatly different from the ones in our own." He nodded to himself gravely, with his head cocked at an angle, as if he were enviously imagining the kind of Greek myth with which some future Professor of Classics should have to deal.

"The Gorgon race is pretty bad in comparison, huh? If I'm going to chase over to—to—"

"Crete. Their headquarters is on the island of Crete."

"We'll, can you give me some idea of what they're like?"

PROFESSOR GRAY sat up, supporting his chin on his knees with his cupped hands. "I can, but please remember that what I know is a combination of archaeo-anthropological data and what I have learned about present conditions from Hermes. Al-

most all the more disgusting monsters, he has explained, are properly speaking members of the Gorgon race who are themselves, however, basically reptile. The Gorgons derive from a universe or universes so different from our own even in the laws of biology and chemistry as to be virtually beyond our comprehension. Their chief-tainness, for example, has a human body and a head covered with writhing snakes. Which jibes, of course, with the description of Medusa in almost all the texts."

"The only thing," he said, his delicate old face wrinkling suddenly, "that bothers me a little is the exact relationship of Medusa to the cult of the Snake-Goddess or All-Mother of ancient, matriarchal Crete. In fact, by middle Mycenaean times—just before the present era—the religion of the Triple Goddess, as she was then called, was being practiced over almost the entire Mediterranean by priestesses who not only dominated the community but had control of all agriculture and most of local industry. In the records of our world, this religion disappeared suddenly, to be replaced by the Olympic pantheon. Yet, here, in a parallel transitional period, some two centuries before the Homeric heroes, there is no sign of either religion. Very strange. Possibly neither has developed as yet; although I would give a good deal to see what conditions are like on Crete. Hermes tells me that since the Gorgons have been crowding in, the island is far too dangerous to visit on a purely social basis. Yet— Yet—"

"And then there's the question of the Gorgons' reptilian form. Among the majority of ancient peoples, the serpent was the symbol of wisdom and fertility. Not until the Genesis of our Bible do we find a less flattering picture of the snake and, even then, he is still incredibly shrewd and cunning."

ning, though no longer friendly to Man. Is it possible, now—"

PERCY, EXHAUSTED by his first two days in pre-Achaean Greece, fell asleep at this point, to dream that he was back in his own time and a clever, fast-talking salesman named Lucifer Beelzebub Hermes had talked him into buying a very expensive restaurant which, upon his assuming ownership, turned out to have a clientele composed exclusively of rattlesnakes who insisted on charging their meals. When he approached one of them with a suggestion that a part of the long-standing bill be paid, the creature lunged at him with an enormous and rapidly-growing set of triple poison fangs.

He was rather bitter when he woke up, even though Ann had prepared a tasty breakfast out of some local bread and cheese and five eggs from as many different types of birds. Also, Professor Gray had laid out some fairly good garments for them.

The fact remained that whatever Medusa was, however dangerous the Gorgons were, he, Percy Sacrist Yuss, was committed to ridding the world of them and would probably, in the process, rid the world of himself.

"Some people," he told Ann morosely, "have lots of different talents. I have only one—being a sucker. But I'm the best sucker, the most complete sucker, that this world—or the one before it—has ever seen. I'm actually a genius at it."

"The trouble with you," she said, surveying him judiciously over an extremely well-designed water jug, "is that you think about yourself too much."

"Well, it's a good idea while there's still enough of me left around to make it worthwhile."

Professor Gray trotted in and insisted on Percy's coming out to test the

weapons which Hermes had been bringing for the encounter with the Gorgon. Reluctantly, Percy followed him outside into the still, strong brightness of a morning in the Eastern Mediterranean.

"This is the cap of darkness or invisibility," the little man said, handing him a collection of curved metal plates welded in a rough hemisphere and decorated with many wires and incredibly tiny transformers. "The switch is just under the brim—here!—but you'll have to be very careful about practicing with it since Hermes tells me its power supply is very low and there is little possibility of refueling for a long while. Don't gape like that, Percy, it really does work! I told you that their science was far ahead of ours."

He reached into the large wicker basket for a black object shaped like an overnight zipper bag. It had a long, looping handle. Where the zipper should have been, however, there was instead a thin and hazy line that shut the bag so completely as to make it seem like one continuous piece.

PROFESSOR GRAY tapped it importantly. "The *kibisis*. The satchel in which you are to place the Gorgon's head after you've cut it off. This is probably the most important single item—except for the boots—that you will be given. You see, according to legend, even after her head has been severed, Medusa still has the power to turn men into stone with a glance. Furthermore, according to Hermes, she is so unlike life as we know it that, merely with her head, she will still be capable of blasting open an ordinary container. This bag can only be opened from the *outside*. You are to place her head in the *kibisis* and keep it there until you hand it over to Hermes. And now for the major item: how are you to get

her head in the first place? Well, we have a sword for you, the famous *karpe*."

He was, Percy noted with disgust, speaking with all the patronizing familiarity of a sports enthusiast or a fight manager explaining the virtues of a new defensive crouch to a young championship contender.

"This is big stuff to you, isn't it, professor? Being able to crowd yourself into a story you used to lecture about?"

"Crowd myself? But I am already in the legend! Professor Gray is as much a part of the original story as Percy S. Yuss is Perseus and Ann Drummond is Andromeda. Hesiod refers to the Graiae Sisters who have been gray since birth and who are largely responsible for the equipping of Perseus on his mission to Medusa. Well, there's only one of me and none of it is female, but it's still close enough to the real myth. As, for example, your rescue of yourself and Ann from the scylla, which is classically a monster of whirlpool and shipwreck, tallies with the original tale which has Perseus saving Andromeda from a sea-beast, though only after he's killed the Gorgon. The fact that you did arrive at Seriphos in a bathtub and as an adult contradicts Pherecydes' version in which the infant Perseus, shut inside a chest with his mother Danae, is rescued from the sea by the fisherman Dictys, brother of King Polydectes. And yet it was Dictys' net that pulled you out of the Mediterranean....

"You see, it goes on and on agreeing with the legend here, altering it slightly there. That's the fascinating thing about myth," the old academician went on: "there's fact in it somewhere, the trick is to find that little nugget of solidity and be able to recognize it when you do. The truth might be that there was originally a

Professor Gray in the actual story as it took place on our world—and his name, sex and...quantity were altered by later writers; or, possibly the truth is that there is a repeating myth in every space-time universe, a myth which has several broad generalizations which must be satisfied, but whose particulars may be filled in from almost any palette."

"You mean," Percy asked slowly, reluctantly unclasping a precious hope he had let nobody know about, "that this time Perseus might be killed by the Gorgon instead of vice versa?"

PROFESSOR GRAY nodded with brain-curdling enthusiasm. "Now you're beginning to understand! Exactly. Don't you see it was always possible, just as it's possible that you aren't the right Perseus any more than I'm the right Gray—or Graiae? That's what makes this whole thing so infernally exciting!"

His pupil started to smile. Unfortunately, since he had great difficulty in lifting the corners of his mouth from under his chin, the attempt was no great success as smiles go. "Yeah," he said. "I'm beginning to see that."

"Here. Try your sword," the professor suggested, his eyes almost popping under the weight of the enormous mass of metal he was holding out to Percy with both straining arms.

Percy took it and, by tearing his back muscles slightly, was able to lay it on the ground before it fell out of his hand.

"Don't tell me I'm supposed to go fence a duel with that girder!"

"Oh, you'll get used to it, you'll get used to it! Notice that it's made of iron, not bronze? Nothing's too good for Perseus!"

"Thanks, pal, from the bottom of my—"

"Of course, in the later vases," the professor had backed into archaeology again, "especially the red-figure ones,

the *harpe* of Perseus is represented in the shape of a sickle. But the earliest kind, the black-figure vases, show it as a straight sword. And a straight sword it must have been because that's how Hermes brought it here to be held against the time when a Perseus arrived."

"Speaking of arrivals," Ann commented from the doorway of the hut, "the 8:45 is coming in on Runway One. Better move back!"

They looked up to see Hermes twirl down from the bright blue sky a little more rapidly than usual. He carried a peculiar and bulky package slung from his belt. He began walking toward them the moment his toe-tips punched the soil.

"Is he ready? I hope he's been practicing with those weapons."

"As a matter of fact," the little old man said, rubbing his forehead, "he just began to examine them. You're a little premature, Hermes: remember, these people only arrived last evening."

THE GOLDEN-SKINNED young man nodded absent-mindedly for a moment, then bent to open his package. "I know. Unfortunately, a good deal has changed in the world since then. The Gorgons will be making their final attempt at conquest in the next twenty-four hours. Medusa must be killed before tonight."

"I won't!" Percy raved. "You just can't pull a man out of a nice, comfortable world and expect him to—to—"

"As I recall," Hermes drawled, turning around with a pair of calf-length metallic boots, "I pulled you out of a series of highly unpleasant situations. You were not too comfortable in that underground cell, and you would have been even less so the next day in a certain large cooking vessel

which I destroyed. Then, there was the meeting in the arena. . . ."

"Percy's point," said Professor Gray uncomfortably, "is that he has hardly begun to adjust to the situation, psychologically. And physically—well, he's not even able to flourish the sword as yet."

"I'll take care of those difficulties!" the messenger promised. "Here are your boots. When you rub them together like so, your mobility is multiplied by a factor of twenty. Put them on and take a drink of this."

Dubiously, Percy donned the boots that were to make him twenty times as fast. The soles vibrated underfoot in a way that was not exactly pleasant.

With even more uncertainty, he swallowed some liquid out of a long tubular flask which the golden one held out to him. He almost doubled over as the drink hit his stomach like a bursting rocket. "Whee-ew! That's potent stuff!"

A thin, smirking grin. "Wait! You've yet to find out how potent it really is. Now, I want you to pick up your sword, Percy. And remember as you do how strong you've become. Why, you're such a powerful man that I wouldn't be at all surprised to see you wave it around your head like a tiny twig fallen from a dead tree."

Percy reached for the sword, a rather silly grin on his face. It was all very well for Hermes to try to inspire him with such confidence, but he knew his capacity. A sword as heavy as that. . . .

Only it was very light. It was the easiest thing in the world to lift and flourish. He did so, marveling at the feel of power in his arm and wrist muscles.

"Wonderful!" Professor Gray breathed. "That flask—does it contain the fabled *Nektar*, the ineffable drink of the gods?"

"After a fashion," the messenger said. "After a fashion. Now that we're all set, Perseus, suppose you gather up your armory and we can start out."

EVENTS got very dim after that. Percy found it hard to remember their sequence. Sometime or other, Ann had come up and said a good deal of angry nonsense to Professor Gray who had seemed very confused. Then, just as she was about to throw her arms about his neck, Hermes took him by the hand and they went soaring away. His head felt a lot clearer when they were high against the clouds, racing southward across an island-dotted sea.

"Why," he asked, "don't you people, with all the tremendous stuff you have at your disposal, go after the Gorgon yourself?"

"A matter of prophecy. The legend of Perseus must be fulfilled at all costs." Hermes let the words dribble out of his mouth as he peered ahead anxiously.

Vaguely dissatisfied, Percy found himself wondering if the answer made any sense after all. Like so many of the things he'd been told recently, it sounded as if a small lump of truth had been used to flavor a great steaming bowl of nonsense.

The drink must be making him feel this way, he decided. Professor Gray was an entirely sincere if slightly bumbling human being. Still...

"And why did you tell us that we'd get sent back to our own time? According to what Professor Gray says, that time is dead forever."

The golden man shook his head impatiently and they both almost turned over. "Now, now, this is no time to look for problems and disagreements. You need another drink. Here."

He almost forced the flask to Per-

cy's lips. Again there was an explosion in his intestines which, while not so violent as the first, had much more of an echo. He looked at Hermes with new trust and fondness. How could he ever have doubted so splendid a friend?

"Let me tell you what you will see when you force your way into Medusa's chamber," Hermes was saying with a drowse-provoking smoothness. "Medusa herself will appear to be a horrible, horrible..."

Under them, the waves raced gleefully through each other, pausing every once in a while to shake a fistful of foam at the constantly watching and disapproving sky. Percy swung lazily from the hands of the steadily talking golden man. Life was simple, he thought, when people told you what to do and what to expect. Everything had become so easy.

He looked up as he felt Hermes let go one of his hands and fumble for the switch on his cap of darkness. A moment later, the same hand made a similar gesture on its owner's wide belt.

"Making us invisible, that's what you're doing," Percy commented, nodding his head slowly.

"Are we there already?"

"Yes. Sh-h-h! Please be quiet!"

TURNING his head, he saw a long, greenly rich island expanding up towards them. "Why did you people have to go to so much trouble making this cap for me and all that sort of thing when you could have given me something you already had—like the belt, for example—and I'd have been able to travel here all by myself? What I mean," he went on with large, drunken generosity, "is that you're probably a busy man, Hermes. 'Sa shame for me to drag you away from—"

"Will you shut up?" Hermes' voice

was a whispered custard of fear. His eyes flickered up and down, right and left, as they dropped into an enormous, silent city built from massive blocks of grey, moss-covered stone. "We didn't give you a belt for the same reason we gave you a sword instead of a ray-gun. Short supply."

"Sup—supply?" Percy asked stupidly. He scratched his head and almost knocked the cap off.

"Supply. And besides, do you think we're foolish enough to trust a human with our weapons?" Their feet touched the worn surface of a rock balcony high up on a building. Hermes pulled him behind the great finger of stone that served as one of the lintels for the only doorway. Percy could feel the twitching tenseness in the body of the golden man as he hugged him to the wall and waited to make certain that no one was coming out on the balcony to investigate.

He tried to remember the last thing that Hermes had said. He found he couldn't and wished desperately that the black blobs in his mind would go away and let him think again. But he remembered that Hermes had made some sort of slip in his fright, that abruptly he had almost had the vision of—of—What?

"You need one more drink before you go inside," came the insistent whisper. Percy started to protest that he had been drinking entirely too much of this strange concoction but, as he did so, Hermes thrust the flask into his mouth. He gagged and managed to dribble the bulk of the liquid down his chest, but enough entered his stomach to provide a walloping accompaniment to the clouds which slid over his thoughts once more.

"Now you know what you are to do. Her bedroom is the first one to the right of the corridor leading away from the balcony. Don't even try to think, Perseus: it will only lead to

disaster! All of your instructions are safely buried in your mind; if you just relax and let them take over, you will do exactly the right thing every time. Remember, you can't fail! You cannot fail! Now go!"

Hermes pushed him around the lintel and down the hall. Percy stumbled the first few feet, then managed to walk upright and as stealthily as he knew he should. He wanted to turn back and argue some very important points with his guide, but somehow it was much more important to keep walking, to keep one hand on the hilt of his great sword, to have every nerve anxious and waiting. . . .

The hall was covered with tapestry of a fabric so strange that it almost seemed logical for his eyes to be unable to focus whenever he tried to make out the design. The tapestry ended just before an archway supported by spiral stone columns. He walked in.

ALMOST before he saw the reclining, sleeping figure with the headful of drowsy, slightly restless serpents, he had flipped open the *kibisis* and ground his boots together to close the sub-surface relays. He was speeding toward Medusa at a fantastic rate of speed across an enormous stretch of floor thoroughly as slimy as Hermes had said it would be. And along the walls, his eyes noted—yes, there were chained the groaning, writhing human captives on which the Gorgon race was constantly experimenting. All, all as Hermes had said it would be, droning the picture into his ear as they flew toward ancient Crete above the gaily splashing sea.

He hardly remembered grasping the snakes with one hand and, pulling slightly to extend the neck, lifting the heavy *harpe* behind him. The sword poured down and the chillingly ugly head came free, greasy stinking blood

pouring from it. He dropped it into the *kibisis* with the snapping, sideways motion that Hermes had told him to use, flipped the lid shut and turned to run back, exactly as Hermes had told him he should.

But, in that moment before he closed the *kibisis*, a single, frantic thought had sped out of the severed head. It hit his swirling thoughts like a pebble from a sling-shot and sent them rippling in so many directions that he almost came to a full stop.

Almost. But he ran on, shaken by the awful familiarity of that mental voice. It was as if his mother had tearfully asked him to stop, to stop now, this moment, no matter what the consequences. It was as if the wisest men in the world had assembled in convention and passed a resolution addressed to him, formally requesting Percy Sacrist Yuss in the name of humanity and universal intelligence to turn somehow, before he plunged the whole world into disaster. It was as if a million tiny infants had bawled out in a terrible, unendurable agony that he alone had caused.

The voice was safely shut in the *kibisis*, but its dwindling harmonics rang on and on in his mind.

Hermes came around the lintel as he emerged on the balcony and waited for him to rub his boots back into normal speed. Then he held out a hand. "All right, give it to me."

He started to hand the *kibisis* over, but the memory of the thoughts locked inside made him pause for a moment. He swung the black bag from its long, looping handle undecidedly.

The golden-skinned man laughed. "You're not going to keep it?"

PERCY didn't know what he was going to do. He certainly didn't want that head of surpassing horror for any reason, that he could think

of. And, certainly, wasn't he supposed to give the *kibisis* to Hermes as soon as he had filled it with the grisly contents for which it had been designed? Certainly he was. Someone had explained all that to him. But that thought he had received from the head...

"Let's not have any trouble, Percy. Give me the bag and we can start back. Your girlfriend is waiting."

That was decisive. He still couldn't think as clearly as he would have wished, but he could remember. He recognized Hermes' manner now; the bitterness was still too fresh in him for forgetfulness.

It was the manner of the broker who had sold him the half-interest in a more than half-bankrupt restaurant. Just as the point when he'd started to ask the questions that had been bothering him about a series of bookkeeping entries, the man had shoved a fountain pen in his hand and begun to prattle of the possibility of selling the place the very next week at a tidy profit. "Of course I don't know if you'd be interested in getting rid of it so soon after purchase, I imagine if the profit were sufficiently high, however, you would hardly feel like holding on. Well, Mr. Yuss, as soon as we leave my office, I'll have you meet Mr. Woodward. Mr. Woodward has been interested in purchasing this restaurant for some time and, quite confidentially, I think we can get close to..." He had signed almost before he knew he had, and acquired therefrom a piece of property that was more like a cash incinerator than an eating-place.

And he had sworn not to be taken that way again. He recognized Hermes' manner now: it was the con man getting a little impatient at the sucker's delay and throwing out some more bait.

"No," he said. "I won't give it to

you until we return. I think I want Professor Gray to look at it first."

He never knew how he realized that the tiny red tube Hermes suddenly flashed was a weapon. He leaped clumsily sideways and the stone wall section in front of which he had been standing exploded like a burst paper bag. He kicked the boot switch into operation and tore the *harpe* out of its back scabbard.

Hermes was turning the ray-gun around at him with the same un pitying, contemptuous smile he had flashed so many times before, when Percy became a darting, feverish flicker of humanity. As the golden man rolled backwards to find a good shot somewhere in this incredibly fast creature who seemed to be one continuous line, his eyes grew wider and wider, his lips pulled in deeper and deeper; a fear ricocheted through him. And, when the screaming sword finally bit his head off, it rolled to the balcony floor looking just like that—thoroughly popped eyes and almost nonexistent mouth shaming the refined gold of the skin and carefully-cut, artistically-designed features.

Percy leaned on his sword and breathed hard. This was the second in one day! He was becoming a wholesaler!

He turned the boots off. He didn't know when he might need that extra speed again in a hurry, or how much fuel they still had left in them. He stepped carefully away from the bleeding, decapitated corpse.

ABRUPTLY the sword grew very heavy; he holstered it with difficulty. The drug was wearing off. He knew it was a drug now as the hypnosis induced by Hermes began to dissipate. The city was still the same quiet stone. But it was no longer the thing of implicit horror it had been up to a few minutes ago. Men lived

here, he knew, and went about their tasks in their various human ways.

The building on whose balcony he stood was much older than the others around it. It had a distinctive style of architecture—more pillared stone and friezed decoration than even a palace should have.

He tip-toed back along the hall. There was the tapestry he remembered, except that now he could see it quite clearly. Men and women were dancing around a huge upright snake in one section; in another a great lizard plowed a field while people walked behind it joyfully strewing flowers across the new-made furrows. In the last, a tall and beautiful woman stood before a crowd of young children and allowed a pair of small snakes to curl around her bare breasts.

He paused at the entrance to the room, reluctant to enter and confirm his suspicions. In his hands, the black *kibisis* undulated slowly as if the thing inside it were still alive. Well, there at least Hermes had told the truth.

At last he looked into the chamber. It was a large, clean room lit by three huge torches, very sparsely furnished. There were no chained humans along the walls; there were colorful murals instead which dealt with a strange nonhuman race.

There was a kind of triangular altar in the middle of the floor. On the other side of the altar, there was a high dais supporting an intricately carved wooden throne. And sagging in the throne was the headless, blood-covered body of a creature Percy had never seen before.

He brought his hand across his lips as partial understanding came to him. This was a temple. But who—or what—had he killed?

The head inside the bag moved once more. He had to find out! He snapped the *kibisis* open and—

He didn't have to take the head out. Understanding came to him then, complete and rounded, to the best of his capacity to understand—as the still-living and slowly-dying thing in the bag telepathically thrummed out its history. It gave him the information he wanted without reproaches and with complete objectivity. And, as he realized what he had been tricked into doing, he almost fell to his knees.

In the almost nonexistent time it takes to feel a doubt or experience surprise, Percy came to know—

LONG BEFORE Man, there had been the other mammals from which he had derived. And long before mammals, millions of years before, there had been the reptile. The reptile had eaten across the planet as herbivore and carnivore, had raced across it as thundering dinosaur and pigmy, rodent-like lizard. In a span of time beside which the reign of mammals was as a moment, the reptile had ruled the Earth with an absolute despotism in all the forms—and many more besides—that his warm-blooded successor was to achieve.

Inevitably, one of these forms laid its accent on intelligence.

A creature arose which called itself Gorgon and walked its ways with pride. Great cities the Gorgons built; they captured and tamed the unintelligent dinosaurs and made cattle out of them, even to the ground-shaking Brontosaurus. Those they could not tame, they destroyed for sport, much as a thoughtful simian newly arrived from the trees was to do much later. And, partly for sport, partly for burning conviction, they destroyed themselves.

War after war, super-weapon after super-weapon, they fought and lived through. They even destroyed the continent on which they had originated, the home of most of their science and art and all of their major industry—

they saw it sink into a boiling sea, and they lived through that. Then, at last, they gathered in their shrunken numbers upon inhospitable shores and created a way of life that made war between them impossible.

There was a brief season of great cooperative achievement, an instant or two of Indian Summer, before the curtain began to fall upon the Gorgons once more. Their seed had been injured by one of the latest weapons: they were no longer breeding true. In small quantities at first, the number of monsters and defectives being born increased rapidly. Almost the entire energy of the race was channeled into a frenzied biological research.

They cured every disease that had ever made them the slightest bit uncomfortable, they doubled and quadrupled their life-span again and again, they came to such ultimately complete understanding of their bodies and minds that they were well-nigh god-like and just this side of immortality. But still, every generation, there were fewer of them....

EVENTUALLY they made peace with their approaching racial death, and set themselves to cheat it by passing their knowledge and achievements on to another creature. This was not easy to find. First, they tended to look within the ranks of the reptiles for a successor, but they had depleted the vital energies of the best nonintelligent species as badly as they had their own. They had a brief success with the serpents and pythons but, despite increased intelligence, no amount of selective breeding or indoctrination could persuade these creatures to live communally. Second, they tried the amphibians; then the birds—

After many trials and many errors, the Gorgons settled at last on the mammalian primate. Here, however, with much difficulty and heartache

because of the creature's fundamentally alien orientation, they achieved success. Slowly, over the unhurried centuries, the Gorgon selected this stock, discarded that one, gently stimulated and educated, until a civilization of sorts had been achieved. A little longer and they could throw aside the mantle of godhood and teach their charges directly.

But the Olympians came.

It was true, as Hermes had told Professor Gray, that a weakness in the sub-spatial fabric between universes had made it possible for them to enter. He had neglected to mention that they were the first and only ones to invade this universe, they and the assorted monsters, that a completely different *corpus* of natural law made it possible.

Originally, they poured into Earth from almost every spot on her surface. They conquered and enslaved, killed and looted, but their chief object was land. The available space on their own highly crowded world was very limited.

And there were only a handful of Gorgons to defend mankind against them. Hurriedly, these ancient reptiles turned to their forgotten and hoary armories, brought out the weapons they had sworn never to use and plunged into combat to save, not themselves—for this they were now psychologically incapable of doing through warfare—but the infant race they guarded. And slowly over the years—while liquid fire rained upon one land and floods swept through another—the invaders were driven back and the exits sealed one by one.

The Gorgon losses had been small numerically, but devastating in proportion to their total strength. There were only three females who escaped being mortally wounded; two badly crippled males had hung on for a century before dying without viable

offspring. The three remaining intelligent reptiles saw no alternative but to concentrate in the Eastern Mediterranean and provide at least a section of the human race with an accelerated course of instruction.

THEN, FIVE hundred years ago, the outsiders were heard from again. This was a remnant which, cut off on this planet by the Gorgon victory, had returned to the sea-level Mount Olympus exit and secretly rebuilt its strength. They had attacked one awful night and wiped out Cnossus, the capital city. Wearily, the Gorgons turned back to combat. They drove the Olympians off and crushed them for the time, but were no longer strong enough themselves to wipe out completely the golden-skinned race. A degenerate fragment remained which was now, like humanity's protectors, a constantly dwindling species.

Before this had been achieved, however, every large city in Crete had been gutted and Sthenno and Euryale, Medusa's sisters, had been killed. She worked desperately now at her double task: to pass on as much of the Gorgon knowledge as humanity was capable of absorbing and to rebuild enough of the ancient weapons to prevent the one remaining danger—an Olympian attempt to break through the sub-spatial fabric once more and regain contact with their parent universe.

To this end she had been preparing a multitude of weapons which men of this time, under her direction, could use against the Olympians. Unfortunately, the entire orientation of the Gorgon educational process had been opposed to war and weapons. This generation of Cretans, while superior in brains and breeding to most twentieth century humans, were decidedly not warriors and were having

great difficulty developing the martial spirit.

Medusa had been sending the priestesses through whom she governed to nearby lands in search of a people who, while possessing the requisite belligerence, were sufficiently advanced intellectually so they still could be persuaded of the necessity of joining the last campaign against the Olympians. The concept of forcing people to fight—even for themselves—was anathema to a Gorgon.

But she had been anticipated. The Olympians had evidently managed to receive some sort of message from their own world and believed that, by operating on both sides of the subspatial barrier, they could effect another breakthrough. It was probably one of the last attempts that could be made (possibly the civilization in the other universe was beginning to dissolve under the continual corrosion of war as the Gorgons' had), and they considered it essential to remove the last of the ancient reptiles to insure that they would not be interrupted.

Knowing that they were far too weak and backward now to carry off a frontal attack with any success, they must have developed the idea of using Percy as a catspaw. Probably, the head mused, one of their number—scouting among ordinary people for crumbs of information Medusa might have dropped—happened upon a superstitious myth-prophecy and decided to develop it into fact. The arrival of a young man from a previous space-time universe worked in perfectly, since no human of this period could be persuaded or frightened into attacking a Gorgon.

AND, AT THE reason why a human assassin was needed by the Olympians, Percy's knees almost buckled.

For no Gorgon, my son, is capable of injuring a human being without committing immediate mental suicide. It would have been like a mother stabbing her crawling infant for me to have killed you, as I could have, when your harpe sang at my throat.

"Listen," he said desperately to the tired, dying head in the black bag, "you may not want to force people to fight for their world, but I don't have any such compunctions. I've certainly been forced to do enough things in my own life that I most definitely didn't like! Now, I know a place where there's a bunch of plenty belligerent characters—and I know a way of getting them to volunteer for the forward echelons. I want to do what I can to fix up this terrible thing I did!"

Medusa considered. He could feel her holding on to her vital energies with more and more difficulty, despite the enormous psychosomatic control practiced by the Gorgons. Her life was seeping away.

Yes, the faint thought came at last. Yes, it might save the planet. It must be tried. Call Athena, young man. Call her with your voice.

He hesitated for just a moment. He licked his lips. It would be kind of nasty if this was just another trap. "Athena!" he called.

Almost immediately, an old priestess hobbled down the hall to the balcony. She clapped her hands to her ears and her mouth distended in horror at what she saw, but at a rapidly telepathed order from Medusa, she controlled the scream in time.

This is no time for sorrow or anger. Weeping must come later in its proper time and place. Meanwhile, the Olympians prepare to tear down once more the barrier between the worlds. If they succeed, there will be none of my race to stand between them and you. They must be stopped! All else

must be subordinated to that necessity. So, go, call your sisters together and make ready the things I have prepared for this day. And hurry, Athene, hurry!

An efficient nod and the old woman had gone back down the hall calling her subordinates.

What are you going to do? the thought came.

Percy told her. There was a pause. Then, *Let it be done, then. But remember my son, no matter what the circumstances may be. I cannot injure a human being!*

Athene returned with a dozen or so wide-eyed, frightened young priestesses whom she organized and ordered so efficiently that they had no time to do more than bite their lips occasionally at the thought of what the *kibisis* contained. Even so, they made Percy feel terrible. He had killed not merely their deity, but their wise teacher and gentle friend. And why? Because he was a sucker.

WELL, HE was through with that from now on, he vowed. He knew what the score was—and from here on out, he would be acting on what he knew rather than on what others told him.

Each priestess was standing on a wide metallic rug piled high with shimmering weapons that looked like spears and battle-axes, but that he knew must be disguised as such merely to be credible to the people of the period. Athene beckoned and he stepped onto her rug. She pulled a tiny switch set in a corner box and turned a small wheel. The rug rose and soared from the huge balcony with no feeling of motion.

"The island of Seriphos," he said to Athene in reply to her questioning glance. Behind him, he could see the other priestesses each on her flying

metal carpet strung out across the sky.

They flew over the waves at a much greater speed than he had when traveling with Hermes. This was a tremendous science he had killed, Percy thought wistfully. All these millennia of working and nurturing and along comes a stumblebum name Percy Sacrist Yuss who has listened to a good smart line and—

Had it happened the same way in his own previous space-time universe, he wondered? Well, there was no way of knowing. Right now he was operating completely outside the framework of the legend—at least Professor Gray had told it to him. Anything could happen.

They came down directly in the village square, as Percy had intended they should for maximum effect. And, while the townsfolk stood around with mouths hanging as slack as their hands, he strode toward the palace with Athene hurrying along on his right.

"I wonder," he said, out of the corners of his mouth to the black bag. "This *horpe's* getting heavier. I can't walk with as much dignity as I'd like to. Could you try some of that hypnosis stuff, perhaps..."

He strode into the pillared hall with clanking boots. He stopped against the massive column where he had been placed upon being brought to this hall as a prisoner. King Polydectes was having lunch. He rose from the long, crude wooden table at Percy's entrance and started to wipe his lips with a nearby wife's hair.

"Welcome home, Perseus, welcome home!" he said with a creaking, somewhat laborious enthusiasm. "We've been waiting for you to return!"

"Have you now?"

"Oh, certainly my boy, certainly! Ever since that tragic mistake out at the theater, we've known for certain

you were really Perseus. I've punished that zoo-keeper horribly, I assure you! Why, he was supposed to have a hundred dancing flower-decked maidens greet you and the girl. Somehow or other he got confused and rang in that scylla. I have absolutely no idea how he made such—"

"Can it. I'm here on business. Call everybody in who can get here fast."

POLYDECTES nodded vehemently and waved at Dictys with both hands. As his brother obediently sped out of the hall, the king, his eyes fastened warily on the black bag that swung at Percy's side, asked in what he evidently considered was a winning voice: "Aren't you going to say hello to your mother?"

Percy stepped back. "My—my mother?"

"Yes, she arrived this morning. When she told us her name, we realized how completely the legend had been fulfilled. We've been making her as happy as possible since, even though it has been a little—eh, a little—expensive."

He pointed to a spot halfway down the table. Percy gasped, then let it roll out into unbelieving laughter. Mrs. Danner sat in her dirty flowered housedress, her arms bent around a huge wine-skin.

"Poor little Marybelle Danner," she was mourning between slobbers. "It's all weak stuff, the best they got's like a baby's slap. And they mix it with water yet!"

So even this much of the myth was fulfilled too! Not a Danae but a Danner had arrived to be associated with him. And the fact that she wasn't really his mother? "She's somebody's mother, boys," he said."

Obviously, if someone was needed to round out the generalities of a legend, they too "fell through", parchment or no parchment. Although he'd like

very much to question Mrs. Danner on the exact mechanics of her arrival. It might be important and useful....

"Take good care of her," he ordered. "And Dictys!"

"Yes, sir," the king's brother inquired as he reentered the hall with a substantial and highly uneasy section of the population behind him. He too kept throwing anxious glances at the *kibisis*: everyone seemed very well educated in the legend on this point. "Anything I can do for you? Anything at all? Just name it, that's all I ask, just—"

"Somewhere on the southern tip of the island," Percy told him, "you'll find an old man, together with the girl who escaped from the arena with me. I want you to find them and make them as comfortable as you can. Concentrate on nothing but making life pleasant for them until I return. If you get slack anywhere along the line, you'll hear from me. Understand?"

"I'm on my way," Dictys assured him. "Hey, Menon, Bupalus, Pataikion! This way. We've to run. Favor for a hero, a man we all admire!"

Percy grinned as the three violently nodding men followed Dictys out of the hall. It was fun to unsucker. But he had business, important business, as the sight of the grim priestess at his back reminded him.

"Polydectes," he said, "you are about to start the first draft in the military history of Seriphos. I'm on my way to attack the Olympians and I'd like you to furnish about fifty good fighting men to assist me in the project."

THE KING stilled the crowd and turned nervously back to the young man before him. "Uh...my people like to stay out of other fracas. That's why they call me—"

"I know," Percy told him: "I know. Only this is urgent. I want those fifty

men very badly indeed. We'll give them powerful weapons such as they've never dreamed of before—and teach them their use. But this is your chance to cut down on that surplus population you're always talking about. And, as I said, it's very important to me." He patted the *kibisis* delicately as he spoke.

"Oh, in that case," said King Polydectes. "If it's urgent! Why, certainly. Captain of the Guard! Detail all twenty-eight members of the army, the ten policemen and any twelve members of the Citizens' Reserve for duty with this famous and spectacular hero. If any one grumbles, tell him he can choose between that and being cooked over a slow fire."

"I see you've repaired the execution pot," Percy commented.

The king shook his head unhappily. "No, it was a dead loss. And we can't get any kind of decent replacement anywhere. But we've been experimenting with barbecue recently. The results, while not perfect as yet, show a good deal of promise. I'm very hopeful."

Percy walked outside to watch the fifty men being assembled. The priestesses had broken them into very small groups and were explaining the functions of the strange new weapons to them. The men looked half-dazed and half-resentful; the fact that women were teaching them how to fight seemed especially confusing. But the presence of "the hero", and the young women's business-like approach successfully kept their attention from wandering.

The head of Medusa stirred in the open *kibisis*. *Hurry, my son. The time of my last weakness draws near.*

"One last thing," Percy assured her. He turned back to the palace entrance where Polydectes stood munching on the dripping leg of a sheep and watching the whole scene with friendly in-

terest. I've done my part, his attitude suggested. I've given of the flower of my country. The best I have. No sacrifice can be too great. . . .

He stared from the king to the weeping women bidding their husbands and sons goodbye, the nervous male conscripts trying to understand their instructors and obviously wondering how they had gotten into a war with Olympians, and back to the chewing monarch.

"There's one thing you haven't been told," he announced. "King Polydectes has volunteered to lead his troops into combat. King Polydectes isn't afraid of the Olympians, so long as he has our weapons to use against them. King Polydectes says, 'Damn the thunderbolts, full speed ahead!'"

"I d-do?" The chunk of mutton dropped to the ground, the sound of its fall obscured by the cheer that went up.

"You most certainly do," Percy told him. He grabbed the quivering monarch with one hand and, stroking the back bag suggestively with the other, drew him gently on to the metallic rug which Athena operated. The other priestesses followed suit with their charges. "This is why," he said in a voice that echoed back and forth across the square, "they call you Brave King Polydectes!"

THEY TOOK off to the accompaniment of another wild'y rattling cheer.

Once they were scudding along the curve of the Greek mainland, Athena began explaining one of the weapons to the ruler of Seriphos.

"You sight your target in the holes running lengthwise through these spears—like this. See that rock? Then, as soon as you've made your sight, you press this little button in the rear. After that, all you have to do is let go of the spear. It won't miss."

"I'm an old man," Polydectes muttered. "Toothless, worn and feeble. In the bleak winter of my life, all I want to do is lie by the fire and watch the youths frolic and fight. Ah, youth, youth!"

Percy walloped his back heartily. "Well, we're giving you a new lease on life! You might as well pay attention, because when we come down, we'll come down fighting. And there's no turning back!"

They passed two great peaks near the coast. "Mount Pelion," Athena said, nodding at the first. "And that's Mount Ossa. Olympus is next."

My son, came the hurried thought. I am dying fast. Grasp my head by the long hairy spines on its back and hold it in front of you when you attack. And, if you are about to be overcome, throw it at your enemies. But you must move rapidly! Already can I sense the dissolution of the impermanent interspace that keeps one world from disturbing another. Our enemies will pour through and overwhelm the pitiful striving. Remember your strength! Remember that it is greater now than when the false Olympian led you to the balcony of my temple in New Cnassus. Feel it, my son, feel it leap through you; feel your mightiness!

And, as they neared the majestic mountain and swung into a circle of carpets for the attack, Percy felt the strength boil in his muscles. He wouldn't have any trouble wielding the *harpe* now!

The only trouble with that was that all of his weapons had been given to him by the Olympians. Wouldn't they know how to deal with them?

He seized a spear as a horde of golden-skinned men swirled off the side of the mountain and rose to meet them. Sighting somewhere in the center of the group, he pressed the button. The spear buzzed out of his hand

and plunged downward, splitting three Olympians like so much *shish kebab*.

Beside him, he heard a similar noise as Polydectes let a weapon go too. The king's success was even greater—he got four flying outsiders. Now that they were in combat, Polydectes was concentrating on nothing but the kill, the most efficient kill, as befitted a barbarian monarch.

A SHEET of flame flashed down from one of the carpets as someone brought another weapon into play. An entire group of ascending Olympians vanished. They turned and sought shelter in the mountain again.

Now, they had the advantage. The long, purple cone of a ray gun raked across a carpet and exploded it. Then another shattered outward. The priestesses brought their craft up higher, out of the ray gun's obvious range.

"Won't work," Polydectes told Percy crisply, as if he'd been advising him on military strategy for the past five campaigns. "They'll come up one at a time now and burn us down. Whatever this thing is that we're flying, we've got to go in after them!"

Percy nodded. He gestured to Athena who, making an overhead motion to the other priestesses, spun the little wheel rapidly. They swooped down, the fore-part of a long parabola of carpets.

Take me now, my son, came the urgent summons. Now!

Percy grabbed the lizard-like head out of the bag by a lock of something on the back that was very much like green hair and held it out in front of him. He reached around and whipped out the *harpe*.

The purple rays died out. He heard screams of terror from below. "A Gorgon, a Gorgon!"

"Yes," he said grimly. "What's left of the one you fellows talked me into killing. It's coming back to roost

along with the sucker that did the job!"

They touched the ground and he leaped down, clicking his boot switches into action. With this much extra speed, he'd match a sword against a ray gun any old time!

Except that from the mouth of the immense cave halfway up the mountain a dozen golden-skinned men poured out wearing identical boots and blasting purple cones ahead of them! And they moved so much faster than he did, their boots were either better-fueled or better-made.

Polydectes behind him accounted for one of them. And a sheet of flame flapping down from one of the nearest descending carpets burned half of the rest out of existence. He ran on toward the cave desperately trying to dodge and circle around the burst-provoking rays.

ONE OF THE Olympians angled in front of him. Percy cursed, realizing he would never be able to reach him in time to use the *harpe*. The fellow's ray gun came up.

And Medusa struck.

Percy, catching her agony in his mind, realized what the effort had cost her. But the Olympian fell forward in cracking fragments; he had been completely ossified on the spot!

So another aspect of the legend was true! Medusa could—

He was inside the cave now and had no time to think. In front of him there was a rank of determined and armed Olympians, some sixty or seventy deep. And beyond them, over their heads, his eyes rapidly followed intricate whirls of wiring and shimmering instruments to where—at the rear of the cave—a little whirlpool of red energy was growing larger in the rocky ceiling.

They were breaking through! At this very moment, they were acquir-

ing reinforcements from the dread other side!

Feverishly, he poured into the attack, slashing them from before him like so many scallion heads on the restaurant cutting board. Beside him, he could hear Polydectes roaring and the men of Seriphos as they poured up.

But he couldn't make it! He'd have to climb those Olympian-filled steps. He knew it despairingly as he hacked and dodged, slew and was ripped himself. He saw that the little whirlpool had grown larger now, that a huge machine had taken shape on the other side and was coming through.

Throw me, Percy! The Gorgon abruptly screamed in his mind.

He brought his arm back and threw the head straight at the skimming scarlet circle high overhead. There was a moment of last instruction that thrummed inside his brain, then the shrill agony of dissolution as the head touched the red energy whirlpool and exploded.

The Olympians screamed their despair when the dust had blown aside sufficiently to show that the entrance was gone. It had been sealed again forever, Percy knew. Never again would they be able to pool their bit of half-knowledge and rebuild their side.

The men of Seriphos pressed in for the completion of the kill. A few Olympians managed to escape out of the cage mouth and soar away, but those who remained fought listlessly.

What were those last instructions the Gorgon had shot at his mind? *The poem! The poem!*

Which poem? The one beginning: "*And thence came the son of Danae, flaming with courage and spirit—*"?

HE WAS standing on a sunny hilltop in the northern part of a small island. There was no one near him.

Percy looked around stupidly. What—

Then, as his mind settled slowly and he remembered the advice Medusa had frantically telepathed to him, he understood. He wasn't happy, but he understood.

Now that the Perseus sequence was over in that particular space-time universe, it was possible only to arrive at the beginning of the one in the next. And while the parchment was gone, the poem related to him, to Percy-Perseus. With that subjective aura and the psychological impetus the Gorgon had given him, he had only to remember the lines of the poem to be precipitated into the next universe.

Why? So that this time there would be no mistake. So that this time he would not be talked into slaying the last surviving Gorgon and removing from humanity the fountain of ancient peaceful wisdom which could nourish it. So that this time he would not—at long, long last—be a sucker.

He regretted it. He especially regretted the loss of Ann whom he had hardly come to know.

But, come to think of it, wouldn't

there be another Ann Drummond in this universe? Yes, and couldn't he be even more successful? He knew his way around now. He'd do that little job for the Gorgon, all right, but first Percy—or Perseus as he might as well call himself here—was going to strut a little. He was carrying a small armory, he knew his power—and he wasn't taking any con games from any man.

No, this time Seriphos was going to hear from him right at the start.

He started down the hill-side, not noticing the young man paddling furiously in a just-materialized bathtub out in the bay.

Nor did he notice the squad of King Polydectes' soldiers eating their uninteresting meal in a clump of bushes halfway down the hill. Nor, if he had seen them, would he have known that their commander was the type to have annoying strangers knocked out from behind so their fine clothes could be stolen at leisure.

Especially was their commander that type after a hot, irritating day spent fruitlessly chasing *harpies* in the hills by order of King Polydectes....

THE END



The Lazy Way


By L. A. Burt

IT ISN'T enough that television has come into the home and made it possible for people to be entertained without doing anything more than flipping a switch. Nowadays, many people take their pleasure only in vicarious ways. The immediate future will carry this even farther. Apparently the latest victim to fall to this inherent love of laziness is the ancient and noble art of reading. Already struck a body blow by television, reading will really shiver under this newcomer—talking books!

Now, books recorded on phonograph records are not new. They have been used for the blind for many years and naturally serve a very useful purpose. The latest

proposal of a manufacturer, however, goes so far as to extend them to the average home. This is dependent upon the development of a new slow-playing record running at as few as sixteen revolutions per minute! This is about an hour to a side of a twelve-inch record!

The manufacturer frankly is catering to the laziness of people, gabbling on their willingness to enjoy reading vicariously. The potential market is huge, of course, and we may see practically everything recorded. Sociologists and scientists will have a field day with this phenomenon. Just how much of a sensory organ can you become? At the rate we're going we'll turn into simply a vast eye and ear with a tiny finger for turning on switches!



All young girls are taught
that "Mother knows best".
But in Diana's case, Mrs.
Wray knew far too much...

ONE GUITAR

SHE DIDN'T look like a zany character. As she leaned back against the piano to sing she looked like a tired, slender, rather serious girl. Under the soft spotlight her skin was milk-white, in pleasant contrast to her dark red hair, which fell softly in a medium-length bob. She wore a two-piece grey wool dress and lavender silk scarf with a casual distinction that failed to conceal the fact that her supple young body bloomed in all the right places.

She sang, with matching casual distinction, in a low, husky, voice. Her phrasing of the simple popular ballad was sure, easy, unique.



By Sam Merwin

Although he had not before admitted it even to himself, it was her husky charm of voice that had brought Lew and his trio to Midland City and an engagement at the Jack of Hearts. Hearing her, seeing her, he was glad he had badgered his agent into the booking.

When she began her second number, a folk-blues, Lew slipped into his chair on the platform behind her, began to improvise added accompaniment on his guitar. He was a tall shaggy young man whose mastery over his trumpet was absolute. On the first break, when both singer and piano rested, he cut in with a lick he had practiced but had never before played in public. He had been saving it for something special.

Slowly she turned her head and her long-lashed grey eyes locked tightly with his blue ones. There was an approving quality to the faint lift of her smile, that suggested she was weighing him as well as his music. He felt numbed, all gone inside, as she turned back to finish the chorus. Yet, somehow, his fingers made music, fitting his chords into those struck by the pianist.

When it was over and the spotlight was off, she came back by the stand and looked at him again. She said, "Thanks, Lew Harlow."

Stupidly he said, "Thank you." Then he blurted, "You're Diana Wray. I heard your recording of *Dallas* with Tal back in New York."

She made an odd distraught gesture with her left hand and said, "I'm afraid I didn't get much into it. I was terrified."

He looked at her, his eyes refuting her remark, and, confronted with her obvious lack of confidence, some of his own assurance returned. He said, "Let me buy you a drink. We don't go on again for twenty minutes."

"I'd like a cup of coffee," she said.

So they had coffee together at a small table close to the kitchen doors in the rear of the cabaret. Torrents of sound broke around them as a five-piece Dixieland band blasted out its stuff on the stand. He was marveling at the greyness of her eyes when she said, looking down at her cup, "You're better than Tal. Not better, maybe, but you work better with me."

He said, meaning it, "Why do you stay here in Midland City? Why don't you come on to the Coast with us? I think our music belongs together, too."

AGAIN she made the odd distraught gesture with her left hand, and her lashes shadowed her eyes. She said, "I guess. . . I mean I took it for granted you knew. I can't leave here. Things. . . happen. Besides, there's my mother."

"We can arrange something for your mother," he said. He leaned toward her, gripped one of her slender wrists lightly. With the contact they seemed to flow into one another. He said as softly as the music would permit, "Come on—say you will. We need you, I need you. I think maybe you need us."

She pulled her wrist free with a sharp movement and now her eyes were wide with fright. She said huskily, "If you know about me, you know I can't."

He exploded. "But that's silly! Nobody's really haunted."

"I am," she said simply, with resignation. "It isn't what happens to me—I never get hurt. It's what happens to people around me. I'm afraid somebody will get killed."

"Poltergeists!" he said with a trace of contempt. "It's mediaeval. I don't believe it."

"I do," she told him. Then, "I wish

you'd leave me alone. I have to stay here, that's all. Please don't torment me."

"Sorry, Diana," he said contritely. "You must know *why* I want you along."

The ghost of a smile was back. She said, "I know, Lew—and thanks. I wish I could go with you. I like your combination. I'm beginning to think I like you."

Scowling, he rested his elbows on the tablecloth and said, "Haven't you tried to lick it? A psychiatrist—"

"It's no good, Lew," she told him. "I've tried everything. When they're around nothing happens. When they aren't and I try to leave town..." She shrugged. "So I'm stuck here with Mother. Manny Wilson pays me a living wage, the people here like me, it could be a lot worse."

"But why doesn't your...er... whatever-it-is affect you here the way it does everywhere else? It's crazy," he said, running long muscular guitarist's fingers through his brown hair.

Her reply was an enigmatic look that forced him to drop his gaze. Finally he said, still not looking at her, "Are you—I mean, is there somebody? What I really mean is, can I date you while I'm here?"

She said, "There's a man or two—nothing serious. I can't afford to let myself get serious. You may date me if you wish. But I'm afraid you'll regret it."

"Do you believe that?" His eyes were again on hers.

Her smile this time was deeper, softer, more sympathetic. She shook her head slowly, said, "No, not really. Perhaps that's why I'm afraid—this time."

"Have there been a lot of others?" he asked her.

SHE SHRUGGED again. "A few—too many," she said quietly. "Does

it matter to you very much?"

"Not to me—not now," he replied and was surprised to discover he wasn't lying. His burgeoning possessiveness toward her dated only from this evening. He wondered a little at that too. Never before had he wanted to own anybody. Never before had he wanted anybody to own him.

A week later Lew and Diana sat side by side on the jump-seats of a long, slick, chauffeur-driven limousine. Behind them, on the rear seat, the members of Lew's trio sang softly in expert rhythm with highly unexpert voices. They rode smoothly along the winding road through the mountains that surrounded Midland City, on their way after hours to play for a party at the mansion of the multimillionaire in whose limousine they were sitting.

It had been an exasperating and frustrating week for Lew. He had dated Diana every night, but nothing had come of it save emotional misery. He was deeply in love with her and he suspected she was as deeply in love with him. They rehearsed together afternoons, they worked together evenings, they dined, supped and occasionally lunched together. But that was all.

She had permitted him to kiss her but once, the night of their first cup of coffee. Then she had said, "No, Lew, I'm not going to let it go any further. It would make us both too wretched."

He was head over Achilles' tendons in love for the first time in his adult life. Yet every night, when he took her home, he had had to leave her with a mere pressure of hands in the lobby of the apartment house where she lived with her mother.

He had asked about Mrs. Wray, wanted to meet her. But Diana had said, "Mother wouldn't like you. She

hates men. She's been a cripple ever since I was born. Sometimes I think she hates me."

"What about your father?" he had asked.

She had lit up in a quick glow of pleasant memories at the question. "Oh, Dad was swell—but he got killed in the war, at Kasserine Pass." Her momentary happiness had faded at the recollection of her loss as quickly as it had come.

NOW, SITTING beside her in the limousine, he looked at her through the semi-darkness, saw her shiver. Her grey eyes slanted to meet his and her lips were narrow with fright. Her hand crept into his as she said, "I shouldn't have come, Lew. There's going to be trouble. I can feel it."

Lew exploded. "Dammit, Di, we have to make the try. Your music and mine belong together. I never want to play without you again."

Her smile was sad. She said, "You'll have to, Lew. Unless you want to stay in Midland City. You know I can't leave."

They were within a couple of miles of their destination when, without warning, a front wheel rolled off the limousine, sending them jolting and careening into the ditch. By the time another car was summoned to convey them the rest of the way, they were already more than half an hour late for the party.

"Accident," said Lew. "It could happen to anybody."

"But it happened to us," Diana said, her voice uneven. Behind them on the temporary platform put up at one end of the millionaire's ballroom, the boys in the trio were muttering amongst themselves. They had, of course, heard rumors of Diana's eerie reputation. Lew uncased his guitar,

began to tune up. He frowned when he noticed that the strings were humming softly without being plucked. It was a constant tone, faint but unmistakable.

They were halfway through their second number, *Honeysuckle Rose*, when a heavy pair of damask French window drapes with weighted valance seemed unaccountably to fly free of the wall, to crash onto the table on which an immense cut-glass punch-bowl rested. The bowl was shattered to fragments, and the footman serving behind it severely gashed over one eye by the valance rod. A lady guest was knocked unconscious, and there were numerous lesser injuries.

Diana's face went chalky. To Lew she whispered, "I'd better get out of here. I can wait outside till you're finished. Otherwise..."

"Don't be a damned fool," Lew told her. "You're with us. We stay or go together. It's just coincidence."

"You still think so?" She wore her enigmatic half-smile, but fright was heavy in her grey eyes. When order was at last restored she sang a number. Nothing happened but applause.

"See?" said Lew, smiling. "It's all right."

"BUT IT isn't," Diana protested. "They're just resting." And suddenly she screamed softly, pointed out toward a broad archway at the huge wall beyond. A crystal chandelier was swaying in ever-widening arcs without visible cause. Her scream and gesture focussed the attention of the dancers upon it. They pulled back in panic, barely in time. All at once the chandelier exploded in a coruscating shower of prisms. All that remained in place were the severed wires of its skeleton, dangling from the ceiling like the bone-ends of an amputee.

Fortunately, this time, no one was

hurt, although it broke up the party. Their host paid them in full over Lew's protests, and within minutes they were on their way back to Midland City in another sleek limousine. The boys in the back seat were silent, accusingly silent, though no further mishap deterred them.

Diana turned to Lew as they neared their destination. "You see?" she said simply.

"I saw," he replied, "but I still don't believe it." However, within himself, he had to accept it. It had happened before. After playing the Jack of Hearts a couple of years earlier, Benny Goodman had hired Diana to go with him and his quintet to Las Vegas. They had been driving and the quintet member at the wheel had been skulled by a rock from nowhere, almost causing their car to capsize. There had been other incidents and he had been forced to send her home.

On another occasion Lew had heard of, a major television outfit had signed Diana to do a sustaining program from New York with all sorts of sponsors in prospect. The train on which she traveled had not been able to move more than a few hundred yards from the station, thanks to repeated and unexplained tuggings on the emergency cord. Diana, terrified, had slipped out and walked back to the station, after which the train had had no further trouble.

Sitting beside her on the jump-seats he said softly as they swung through the dark suburbs of Midland City, "Di, you're coming home with me. We've got to thrash this thing out. Besides, I have a hunch you need me tonight."

Her reply was a whisper. She said, "Darling, you don't know how much!"

ONCE THEY reached his apartment, he made some coffee and

they sat on the couch to drink it. She talked to him more openly than she ever had before. She said, turning her head to look at him, "Darling, there's more to it than the poltergeist business. I have dreams."

"Don't we all," he countered, working an arm under her head to encircle her and draw her close against him.

"But not like mine," she told him. "I have these all the time—wild dreams of space and alien planets. Sometimes when I wake up I feel as if I didn't belong here—on Earth. Lately they've been getting stronger."

"Poor Di," he said softly. "We're going to get married right away."

She hugged him, kissed him lingeringly, whispered, "I'm grateful for *this*, darling. Don't ask the impossible."

He sat up at that, hugged his knees. "Why not?" he asked. "Why is it impossible? I want to marry you, you know that. We belong together—our music belongs together."

"But it won't work, darling," Diana said miserably. "You've got a career. You've got to go on."

"Not without you," he said stubbornly. "If you can stick it out in Midland City, so can I."

"You're sweet," she told him, "but it's not for us. I'm not like other people. I'm...well, I'm a freak."

"Oh, shut up," he said, not unkindly. "There has to be a way out of this somehow. Dammit, I'm going to marry you anyway. Maybe that will scare your poltergeist away."

"It won't do any good," she told him. "Besides, there's Mother. We'd have more problems than I'd have a right to ask you to bear."

"I'm doing the asking," he said bluntly. "And I want to meet this mother of yours." He took care not to give her a chance to reply.

The next afternoon he went home

with her. Diana and her mother lived in a large and comfortable apartment, furnished with good replicas of good antiques. Lew noted it was clean and dusted, felt warmth of approval at Diana's competence as a housekeeper. A plump colored woman, a bright green bandanna about her round head, greeted them at the door. To Diana's question she replied, "Missus Wray's jest the same, Miss Di. I'm glad you finally got here. I've got to go out for a while."

MRS. WRAY lay in a large four-poster bed in a room washed with golden afternoon sunlight. Her skin, even whiter than Diana's, seemed almost to match the pillow on which her pale red hair rested. She looked so frail, so thin, so wasted, that she seemed barely alive—save for her eyes. They were actually lighter than her daughter's, except for tiny black dots of pupils that studied Lew with unwavering malignancy.

Yet her voice, when she spoke, was soft. She said, "Diana, you might introduce me to Mr. Harlow."

Lew, feeling nervous under that constant regard, laughed a little, said, "Consider it done, Mrs. Wray. And please call me Lew."

"I've listened to your music," she said, her eyes moving toward a small radio that rested on her bedside table. "You play very well." Then to Diana, without moving her head, "Diana, please bring me my jacket. You'll excuse me, Mr. Harlow." It was a command, not a request. As he retreated into the living room Lew was conscious of two things about the older woman. One, save for her eyes and lips, she had not moved a muscle while he was in the room. Two, she spoke with a faint sibilance, a trace of accent he failed to recognize.

When he returned she was sitting

up in bed, bolstered by a small mountain of pillows, wearing a pale lavender bed-jacket that contrasted pleasantly with her light red hair. Looking at her thus Lew realized something else about her. She was, in delicate perfection of feature, the most beautiful woman he had ever seen in his life. But the light of her loveliness was as cold as a firefly's flame.

They chatted briefly, inconsequentially, and all the while he could feel the malignance gnawing at him. And still Mrs. Wray barely moved. Diana brought a scarf and wrapped it about the slender column of her neck, brought her a handkerchief from a box on the dresser across the room, eventually brought her dinner on a tray. There was a little stewed fruit, a small glass of milk, a single triscuit. "Mother can't eat cooked foods," she said.

"My stomach is not strong," Mrs. Wray explained, finally moving her arms and hands slowly, carefully, daintily, as she ate. She still continued to address him as Mr. Harlow and, when he caught her gaze upon him, it remained bright with hatred.

IT WAS not until just before they had to leave for the Jack of Hearts that he mustered up courage to blurt, "Mrs. Wray. I'm in love with your daughter. I believe Diana loves me. I want to marry her."

"So?" Mrs. Wray spoke after a long pause, during which Diana looked at Lew with frightened, pleading eyes. The older woman turned to regard her daughter, then looked back at Lew and said, "I've been afraid of this."

"Why afraid?" he countered as persuasively as he could. "It's a lot more than physical attraction, though Lord knows there's that, too. We belong together, musically as well as person-

ally. I have a hunch we'll be happy together."

"In spite of Diana's...affliction?" Mrs. Wray asked quietly.

He nodded. "In spite of that," he said. "I'm perfectly willing to spend the rest of my life here if I have to, to be with her."

"That's quite a sacrifice, young man," she told him—and he could sense savage sarcasm beneath the cool softness of her tone. For the first time she laughed, but it was not the laughter of mirth. She added, "I'm afraid I shall be compelled to think it over."

Lew stood up. He said, "Mrs. Wray, both your daughter and I are of age. We can both support ourselves—and you, if need be. We can, you know, marry without your consent—though frankly, for the sake of Di's happiness, I'd prefer to have it."

"If you marry without my consent—and I very much doubt that I shall grant it—you'll both be sorry as long as you live," said Mrs. Wray with icy finality. "Now, please go—both of you. I must have rest and solitude to think this over."

Diana shivered against Lew as they rode down in the self-service elevator. She said, "Lew, you shouldn't have spoken to her like that. Nobody ever has. She'll never give her consent now."

"Then we'll do what I said and get married without it," Lew said, putting an arm around her and holding her close against his side. "Darling, you can't let her wreck both of us."

"I know, dear," Diana said softly. "It's just that—oh, I can't explain."

"But you'll marry me anyway?" he said, pulling her around in front of him, putting both arms around her. Her unsure "Yes" was almost lost in his kiss.

LATER, in the cab en route to the club, he said, "Di, what's wrong with your mother anyway? I thought at first she was paralyzed."

"She isn't," the girl told him. "But it's just as bad—or almost. She hasn't walked by herself in ten years. It's—there's nothing exactly wrong with her, but she's incredibly weak."

"Damnedest thing I ever heard of," he muttered. "I can't understand it."

"Neither can any of the doctors she's let look at her," Diana said, frowning. "She doesn't like doctors, though. She can't stand to have anyone touch her but Tildy and me."

"It's easy to see where you got your looks," he told her.

"Oh, mother's beautiful," said Diana as if stating an accepted fact. "More so than I ever hope to be. She makes me feel—well, sort of coarse beside her."

"Darling, you're anything but," he said softly. "And you have something she's utterly without: warmth."

Diana crept up into his arms and kissed him, then got to work with her handkerchief on a lipstick removal job. While she scrubbed his mouth she whispered, "Lew, I'll do anything you want."

That evening events developed with amazing speed. An important Midland City judge, who had become a Lew Harlow fan during his stay at the Jack of Hearts, came in with a party. There Lew managed to corner him and tell him he and Diana wanted to get married—that night. It was hardly an impulsive move, for he was terrified of Mrs. Wray's ultimate influence on her daughter's decision to marry him.

The judge, who was in a mild alcoholic glow at the moment, agreed to make a special dispensation. A license was procured from somewhere and after the final show Lew and Diana

were married from the bandstand with the trio and Manny Wilson, the manager, standing by. There was a party afterward and they didn't get back to Lew's hotel suite till dawn.

The weather turned hot the next day. When they went back to Diana's apartment, Mrs. Wray was not wearing her bedjacket. Her malevolence, as she studied the guitarist, seemed even greater than the day before. This time she made no pretense at politeness as they stood in the doorway.

She said, "Mr. Harlow, I want you to stop seeing my daughter. There are factors involved of which you know nothing."

HER VOICE, while not loud, was chillingly clipped. Lew could feel Diana cave in beside him. He put an arm around her to brace her, said evenly, "Mrs. Wray, Diana and I were married early this morning in a perfectly legal ceremony." He went on to state succinctly the circumstances of their wedding. As he spoke Mrs. Wray seemed visibly to shrivel under the impact of his words.

When he had finished she said, "I feel sorry for you, young man. You don't know what you've done—to Diana as well as to yourself. I must ask you both to leave me for a little while."

"Are you sure you're all right, Mother?"

"What could be wrong with me?" her mother countered ironically. "Please go, though I must say, Diana, I'm grateful for your concern toward me."

Outside, Diana wept in his arms. "I feel so awful," she sobbed.

When finally they were summoned back to the bedroom, Mrs. Wray regarded her daughter with the same hatred she had hitherto reserved for Lew. She said, "Diana—after all my

warnings, after all my—"

"Just a moment!" Lew interrupted her sharply, staring at her. He turned to his bride, said, "Diana, where does your mother keep her bedjacket?"

"Why—in the closet," said the girl, not understanding.

"You say she hasn't walked in ten years?" he asked and, at Diana's mute nod, "Then how come she's wearing it now? She wasn't when we were in here a few minutes ago."

"Mother—" began Diana, broke off as the full implication of Lew's discovery sank home.

The hatred in Mrs. Wray's pale eyes seemed actually to crackle, but by this time Lew had gone too far to stop. He took two long strides toward the bed, pulled the coverlet all the way back.

THE LEGS that protruded beneath the fine cambric nightgown were like those of a famine victim. Every bone showed clearly through the almost transparent skin. He looked for a long moment, then recovered the older woman. He stepped back, said, "So it's been you all the time."

Her laugh was almost a cackle as she said, "Yes, it's been I. But knowing isn't going to do you any good, Mr. Harlow."

"What does it mean, darling?" Diana asked, bewildered.

"It means your poltergeist is solved," Lew told her. "Your mother is telekinetic. She can move objects at a distance by mental control. And she's been using her talent to hold you in Midland City."

"You—you're sure?" the girl asked him. Then she turned to look at her mother, and what she read in that exquisite parchment face gave her the truth. She cried, "Mother, why?"

"I can only assure you my reasons have not been selfish," said Mrs. Wray

faintly. "I'm sorry—but there was no other way. And the time is growing so short."

Lew was scowling at her and running his long fingers through his thick brown hair. He said, "There's more to it than that, Di. I haven't quite figured it out—but I took a pre-med course before I quit college to play guitar. Her joints—her knees and ankles—I never saw anything quite like them."

"Yes, there's more to it," Mrs. Wray told them quietly. "My work here is almost ended. And don't think you can check me now, Mr. Harlow."

"I'm damned well going to try—*Mother*," he told her. "But those tiny bones, your weakness—it's almost as if you weren't intended for this planet, for this gravity."

"You're very clever, young man," the older woman replied acidly. "But it's not going to do you a bit of good. My work here is all but finished."

Lew continued to scowl and rumple his hair. Finally he said, more to himself than to either woman, "This is nineteen fifty-six, late August. You say your work is almost done. Unless my memory's gone haywire, Mars and Earth are coming into perihelion opposition right now. They'll be closer than they've been in about fifteen years. Coupled with your physical structure and your strange gifts—I'm beginning to wonder..."

"You *are* clever," said Mrs. Wray with something like admiration. "If it weren't so patently absurd, it might be true."

Lew ignored her, went on with, "What's going to happen, Mrs. Wray? Are they coming to take you home?"

Mrs. Wray laughed her mirthless laugh again. She said, "Not for me, young man. *My* job is done."

Lew reached for Diana and pulled her close to him. "But why, *why*—why

does it have to be my Diana?"

THE OLDER woman replied, "You've figured out so much, my dear son-in-law, you should be able to work that out. Consider, Mars is a dying planet—Earth is not. Yet only a few of our strongest can endure your gravity, your atmosphere, for more than brief periods."

Diana lifted her face, a face blank with hopelessness, to Lew's. She said in a husky whisper, "Darling, it means—it means I'm not even entirely a woman. I'm half Martian." She wrenched herself free of him, fled to a chair, covered her face with her hands, said in muffled tone, "If we should have a child—what will it be?"

"Don't worry, my dear," said her mother. "You're all woman. In some remote era our races sprang from a common stock. But we need your strength on Mars—to breed men and women capable of withstanding conditions on Earth."

"It's horrible!" Diana exclaimed, lifting her tear-stained face to stare unconprehendingly at her mother. "How can you do a thing like this to *me*?"

"Has it occurred to you that I'm asking far less of you, Diana, than I have given myself?" Quietly, with lucid clarity, she told the story of a half-dozen Martian women, carefully selected and sent to Earth in 1933 for the express purpose of cross-breeding the human species of the two planets, of their landing on an isolated mountain plateau near Midland City.

"We selected it because its high altitude made the atmosphere less heavy for us," she concluded. "Our leaders had studied Earth. We were selected for our beauty by your standards, not by ours. Two of us died within weeks. The rest of us managed to mate. But I was the only one able

to bear a child and live." There was fierce pride in the statement, indomitable purpose that Lew found himself sympathizing with, even while he loathed the entire concept.

He said, "And when you'd achieved your purpose, what then?"

"Migration," she told him. "Naturally, we don't welcome the idea of living in a world where men are dominant. Their aggressive instincts can bring nothing but ruin. There will have to be changes made. But it will take time."

He looked at his stricken bride, then at her mother. "The dreams," he said. "Diana's dreams. You're responsible?"

"Of course," said Mrs. Wray. "It was a sort of indoctrination. Space travel is not easy."

"And your people are coming for Diana soon?" he asked.

"Within a day or two—no more," the older woman replied.

Lew crossed to his bride, pulled her gently from her chair. "Darling," he said, "let's get the hell out of here."

"If you do," Mrs. Wray told him quietly. "You'll die."

"Oh, my God," wept the girl, "and I got you into this!"

"I got myself into it," said Lew. "Come on. Do your damndest, Mother. Good afternoon."

HE GUIDED Diana from the bedroom, moved toward the front door. She came unresisting. In the foyer he picked up his guitar. They had been given two nights off from the club by way of a wedding vacation. He could hear the strings humming unplucked even through the case. For some reason the sound spelled warning. He recalled the only previous time he had heard the ominous strumming: the night of the private party when Diana's poltergeist

had been in full operation.

Had it not been for this cue he might not have trod so warily, might not have noticed the front-door bolt turn silently as he approached it with his bride. As it was, he jumped clear just in time. The door swung inward at him with vicious force. He might easily have had his face smashed in if he hadn't pulled back.

It slammed shut and relocked itself. Lew gave Diana an encouraging squeeze, then led her back to the living room. "It's no use just now," he said. "We'll have to stay for a bit."

"But what are we going to do?" she asked. Then, trying to pull away from him again: "How can you bear to touch me?"

"Honey," Lew told her, "don't you know it's every man's secret desire to find a beautiful girl who is different? Well, I'm the champ—I've found one about as beautiful and different as you can get. And I'm going to hang onto her."

"Thanks, darling," she whispered, seeming at last to gain a measure of reassurance from his words.

From the bedroom Mrs. Wray's thin voice floated. She said, "I know it's not considered good Earth practice for newlyweds to spend their honeymoon with their mothers-in-law, but I'm afraid in your case it's quite necessary. Fortunately, your honeymoon will be brief."

"This phase of it, at any rate," replied Lew.

He sat down on the sofa with Diana beside him, and began to map some sort of campaign. Mrs. Wray, he felt sure, was dying. She was merely hanging on by sheer willpower until her assignment was completed. Part of him could not help but admire her. Yet, he was going to have to fight her every inch of the way.

He couldn't kill her. Outside of an

Instinctive inability to act so ruthlessly, he had an idea her telekinetic gifts would enable her to protect herself against him, now that she knew him to be an enemy. He had been able to pull back the covers, he suspected, only because his move had taken her completely by surprise. Which meant that telepathy or mind-reading was not among her alien talents.

She had, by her achievements, both telekinesis and extrasensory perception. Otherwise she would not have been able to move objects toward a selected target at a distance. He wondered briefly how it was accomplished, then recalled the humming strings of his guitar. It was done, he felt certain, either through sub- or supersonic impulses. And sonics were something that he, as a musician, understood.

He got the instrument out, listened to its unplucked chord. The combination was odd, alien, yet it made sense of a sort. He picked it up, plucked it, seeking to intensify the same faint sound. He began to get the seed of an idea. He looked at his bride, who was regarding him with wonderment. He whispered, "Don't give up the ship, honey. We're going to win out yet."

H E GOT the combination, or as close to it as the limitations of his instrument permitted. Then, slowly, he began to strum it himself, increasing volume and vibratory rate. The alien woman in the next room uttered some odd unintelligible syllables. He increased volume and frequency still further. A picture took off from the wall and flew across the room to crash against the wall. A chair beneath the windows went into a kind of crazy dance. A table lamp rose slowly in the air, turned upside down, and returned to its place, wobbling a

long moment before toppling and shattering on the floor. By increasing the sonic key Lew had stimulated his mother-in-law's telekinetic gifts until they were out of control.

"Lew!" exclaimed Diana, her face a mask of terror. "What's happening?"

He shook his head at her, increased his volume until the sofa beneath them began to rock ominously. Then, abruptly, he struck a series of clanging discords, sharp, harsh, shattering both the tonal and vibratory pattern. As the echo faded, a shrill scream sounded from the bedroom, and every inanimate object around them ceased to move.

Still carrying his instrument, Lew rose and walked to the bedroom door. Mrs. Wray lay flat on her back, her arms outstretched, her small mouth open. At his shoulder Diana said, "Lew, you've killed her!"

"I don't know," he said grimly. He went forward, felt for the faint flutter of her heart. It was still pumping faintly. Without turning he said, "Di, get a doctor here, quick." As he spoke he heard the front door open and Tildy's exclamation as she saw the wreckage in the living room. Then he heard Diana's voice following the gentle rasp of her dialing.

TWO DAYS later, after the funeral, Lew and Diana drove high up in mountains in a borrowed roadster. With Mrs. Wray's death the night following their marriage, and the attendant complications, they had had little chance to be alone. The afternoon sun was still high, although it was past four o'clock.

At a level spot he pulled off the road and parked, Diana close within the curve of his arm. Together they looked out at the mountain vista before and below them. They said nothing.

(Concluded on page 125)

YOU TAKE THE HIGH ROAD

By Stephen Marlowe





It was a funny world, Chambers found. All you had to do was beat them up, and the Murkies were your friends for life . . .

CHAMBERS came away from the port in a hurry. "Hey, Jenks," he cried. "Come here and look at this."

Jenks, the captain of the *Sirius Sue*, was a big man and a heavy man and he did not move fast. Peterson, the astrogator, got there first, gaunt-cheeked and grim. "You see him, Doug?"

Chambers shook his head. "I don't know. But I see some of those damned Murkies, that's what I see. Take a look for yourself."

The *Sirius Sue* rested on its side in a field of what could have been scrub grass, except for its purple color. Half a dozen of the Murkies had come up in the gathering darkness, and now they prowled about outside the little

freighter.

Jenks was puffing when he reached the port. "What are they carrying? Look—"

It could have been Smith, bulky, two arms, two legs. But it seemed too limp, and on closer inspection it turned out to be Smith's spacesuit.

Chambers cursed once and then ran for the airlock, gripping a blaster tight in his hand. "They've killed him," he said.

This time, for all his great size, Jenks moved rapidly. He reached the door ahead of Chambers and he stood there with his hands raised. "Hold it, Doug. You're not going outside. Not like that, not with your gun."

"They killed him—"

"Maybe yes, maybe no. I don't know. But there are only three of us, or four if you count Smith. There's a whole planet of Murkies, and if you think you're jumping out there with a gun, you're crazy. They're riled enough now, and you're not going to rile them more, not while I'm still captain of this ship. Sit down and take it easy, Doug."

Chambers growled something under his breath and holstered his blaster. Across the room, Peterson pointed through the thick glass of the port. "They're going away," he said.

It was true. Dancing and jumping weirdly in the half light, the Murkies were leaving the field of purple scrub grass. Some of them paused to heave big rocks at the hull of the *Sirius Sue*, and those that struck clanged resoundingly throughout the length of the little ship, grating against the nerves of the three men within it.

After a time Jenks said: "You can go outside now if you want to, Doug. They left the spacesuit."

It was nothing but a spacesuit. Silently, Chambers picked it up and returned to the ship. The funny part of it was that Smith had not even needed

his suit outside. The air was close enough to Earth norm to keep them alive, and although cool, the temperature was well above the freezing point of water. It almost could have been a pleasant little globe upon which to be stranded for a few days—except for the Murkies.

"SMITH'S GONE," Peterson said. "That leaves three of us. What next?"

"We don't know for sure that he is gone." This was Jenks. "But we'll have to assume that to be true."

Smith had a wife and three kids on one of the Jovian moons back in Sol System.

"How will we tell his family?" Peterson growled.

"Hold your horses," Chambers told him. "Who said we'd get back to Sol System to get the chance? These Murkies seem to have other ideas."

"We'll have to try again," Jenks said.

Peterson was indignant. "You mean, send someone else out there?"

The captain nodded. "We'll have to. We need steel, that's all there is to it. A meteor hits us, we get a hole big enough to drive a ground car through, so we need steel to repair it."

"All right," Peterson said, "you go out there and ask them for it."

"You're acting like a child. We'll draw lots like we did the last time."

The last time Smith had received the short straw and, smiling, he had gone out to bargain with the Murkies for steel. They returned his spacesuit a day later, with the coming of darkness. Each day they came to the *Sirius Sue* with the coming of darkness, just after the dull red globe of Antares had set on the near horizon, and that is why Chambers had first dubbed them "murkies".

The straws really were pipe cleaners from Peterson's corn cob, and Jenks

had broken one of the three short. Now he held them in his big hand, and Chambers took one, palming it and keeping his fist closed. Peterson followed suit, and then they opened their hands.

"God, it's me. I got the short one," Peterson said.

Jenks looked at him. "Tomorrow morning will be soon enough."

Chambers frowned. "It isn't right, Jenks. Peterson, you're scared, aren't you?"

"Yeah. Yeah, of course I'm scared—"

"He shouldn't go, captain. I'll go instead. . . ."

"No you won't. You're the last one I'd want out there, Doug. You'd go with your blaster ready and the Murkies would come swarming down here and then none of us would get off this planet. Let's just leave it to chance, the way we did."

Outside, it was dark. In a while, Peterson opened some cans and they ate in silence. Chambers lit a cigarette and Jenks settled back with his pipe, but Peterson paced back and forth in the little room. "Funny," he said. "If we only knew what they had against us." It was a good question. They had been on the planet for three days, and the very first evening the Murkies had come to throw their stones.

"Simple," Jenks told him. "They just don't like strangers. We humans are gregarious. We humans are that way, both among ourselves and among the outworlders. Not the Murkies. They don't like strangers. Maybe if you're diplomatic tomorrow, Peterson—"

"I'll try, captain. Say, you fellows see to it that my pension goes to my family in Io City, will you?"

Chambers put out his cigarette. "I say we're not going about this thing right, Jenks. There's always an explanation for behavior—animal, hu-

man, outworld. It's the same thing, there's an explanation. We have to find it. If we studied these Murkies instead of going right up to them and asking for what we want, we might find it. Why do they act this way? Why do they hate us?"

"Uh-uh, Doug. We tried to talk with them that first day, remember?"

"Doug remembers," Peterson said.

"How could he forget?"

The telepath scanner had shown nothing. The thoughts had come through as words, but it had been gishherish. "That proves nothing," Chambers said. "They don't think the way we do. All the the more reason to expect unusual behavior, to study it, to see what causes it, to act accordingly. What do you think, Pete?"

"I don't know. How should I know? Jenk's running this show: I'm only an astrogator. I'll go tomorrow. . . ."

HE LEFT in the morning, soon after Antares' dull swollen globe had marched up over the horizon. He tried to smile as he went, wearing his spacesuit to equalize the light gravity to Earth norm, but it looked more like a grimace. He had with him jewelry and silks from the *Sirius Sue's* cargo, and he was to trade this for the precious steel.

The Murkies came at dusk, a dozen of them this time. They were reptilian forms, not unlike giant wraith-thin frogs which walked upright. They came in their weird dance, jostling one another, circling, leaping up and down, each one trying to be the first to reach the ship. This time they came closer and stones pounded against the hull of the *Sirius Sue* for almost an hour.

Chambers knew it was hopeless, but he tuned in the scanner. He heard: "Hello, hello, hello! Greetings to you, friends from the sky. We strike you with stones and we hope you die. Hello, hello, hello!"

Jenks reached out and flicked the switch to the off position. "Bah!" he said. "Don't bother with it, Doug. They're nuts."

"I don't know...."

Slowly, the Murkies danced away from the ship, and Jenks stood up. "I have an idea."

"A pat on the back for you, Captain. You had one day before yesterday, and we got Smith's empty suit back. Today, will they leave us Peterson's?"

"I'll take care of this myself, Doug. Just an idea...."

He went to the lock and he opened it. Chambers stood at the port and watched the big man step outside. He must have called out, because some of the Murkies turned to face him, and in a moment they were leaping back towards the ship. Jenks spread his hands eloquently enough in the universal sign for peace, but the stones began to clatter against the hull again.

Jenks whirled back and ran for the port, but one of the rocks struck his shoulder and he stumbled and fell. The Murkies came on, striking one another in their efforts to reach the fallen man first.

Chambers swore and ran to the lock. He opened it and for a moment he heard the weird calls of the Murkies. Then he had reached Jenks and he was aware of the flying stones all about him. He tugged at the big man's shoulders and, in the light gravity, he lifted him and carried him like a baby back to the ship. Then he slammed and bolted the lock; and it was several moments before the fusillade came to an end, before the Murkies retired for the evening.

A big bandage covered Jenk's right shoulder, and a frown covered his face. "I thought if we got friendly right here at the ship, it might be different. We could show them exactly what we wanted—"

"Yeah. You *thought*. Now you're flat on your back and I'll do the thinking. See that?"

Another spacesuit lay on the floor near Smith's. "That's Peterson's," Chambers continued. "They brought it back. Smith and now Peterson—"

"What do you want me to do? I tried...."

"Okay. Okay. Now it's up to me. It'll take a few days before you can move that shoulder, captain, and if I die, I want to do it my way."

"Listen, I'm giving orders. You know what Ordinance says—"

"I know. It says that in cases of emergency on an unknown planet, only one man is to go out at a time. He's to reach the nearest center of habitation on a populated planet and request—keeping the dictates of the outworld ethic clearly in mind—and request what's needed. Nuts!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean different culture, different problems, different reaction. You know what you can do with Ordinance and the outworld ethic. When you're in Rome, Jenks—"

"What are you going to do?"

"Well, it takes a minimum of two to pilot a ship. Not less, it takes two men. I'm not going out there like Smith and Peterson, that's a cinch. You'd get *my* spacesuit back here by nightfall, and that would be the end of it. Even if you could patch up that hole in the ceiling, which you couldn't—not without steel from the Murkies—you'd never get away from here. One man can't run a ship, Jenks; so now neither one of us is expendable. We're twice as precious as gold, each one of us."

"So what?"

"So this. I'm not going out there to the Murkies with my arms spread wide, not this boy."

"You go with a gun and they'll kill you just as quick."

"Sure, I know, but I'll take one anyway. It gets to be habit, Jenks—you carry one for so long, you feel lost without it. But I'm going as a student."

"A what?"

"A student. You heard me. I'll be a student of extra-terrestrial anthropology. I'm not going to do a thing with those Murkies—until I find out what they are. Then maybe I can do something that can help us. Okay?"

"Okay. What can I say? I'll be on my back for a few days, so there's no drawing straws this time. A student! You don't mind if I think you're crazy, Doug?"

Chambers smiled. "Go ahead, if it'll help to pass the time."

ANTARES was a big bloodshot red eye halfway up in the morning sky when Chambers set out. He had a blaster in his belt and on the other side he carried a hand-scanner. You couldn't be a student of extra-terrestrial anthropology without a student's tools. He had used a scanner on the Murkies before and it had been worse than useless: but he could only try again.

The red glow of Antares cast a somber light on everything about him, but through it Chambers saw a pleasant world. There were large plants and small ones, mostly reds and purples with broad flat leaves of a glossy texture. Little animal-things scurried out of sight every now and then before he really had a chance to see them, but of bigger forms of active life there was no indication. Nothing but the Murkies. Ahead of him a few miles was their city: this he knew because he had seen it from the air before the crippled *Sirius Sue* had plummeted down upon the planet.

It was a crazy city, but they had landed near it because of Interstellar Ordinance. As far as they could see

from the air, it was the only city on the planet, yet it seemed to be torn by strife. They had swooped low over its buildings, and not one of them seemed to be completely intact. Most were crumbling and broken, not from age or decay: the stone and the metal and the glass were too new for that.

Then the city was in a state of ruin from warfare. That much, at least, was obvious. Yet of another city they had seen nothing, and now Chambers had not even been able to detect signs of other animal life large enough to be of any consequence. Were the Murkies, then, fighting an interstellar war? This hardly seemed likely, because the crew of the *Sirius Sue* had discovered their planet only a few days ago. Jenks had checked the charts and it was unmentioned, unknown—a tiny speck too far off the star trails to be detected except by the sort of accident which brought down the *Sirius Sue*.

Chambers shrugged. Everything was purest conjecture until he actually had a chance to see the Murkies at first hand. He bounded away towards the horizon, held in check by gravity only one-third as strong as Earth's, and in spite of Smith, in spite of Peterson, in spite of the Murkies, he found himself whistling. This could be such a pleasant little world. Besides, he was not altogether sure that Smith and Peterson were dead. He could not be sure of anything....

THE MURKIES stood in a little clearing where the vegetation was not so high, and they were fighting. Chambers came upon them quite suddenly and he crouched low in the shrubbery to watch. They fought like two giant reptiles, hissing and snapping at each other, and the blood which flowed was green.

Presently one of them backed away and took a little basket out of a pouch on his waist. He sat down and

opened it, and the other joined him. Soon they took out two little jars and began to eat whatever was within them. For a few moments they sat eating, and then, in reptilian fashion, two long forked tongues protruded to clean their lips. They had lousy table manners.

In a moment, they were fighting again. They carefully packed away the remains of their lunch—it seemed for all the world like a picnic to Chambers—and then they were locked together again, tooth and nail. He left them that way, still fighting in their clearing, the only indications of hostility in a tranquil environment.

The more he bounded over the peaceful terrain, the more Chambers liked the world. After a time you got used to the odd diffusion of red, and everything else seemed in quiet harmony. A colorful, harmless world, except for the Murkies.

Suddenly Chambers found himself regretting the fact that he had not used his scanner on the battling Murkies. He could not tell, of course, what it would have shown him, but at any rate he'd get another chance when he reached the city. Their jabbering, then, would have nothing to do with the ship from the sky, and it might make more sense. It might, and then again it might not.

It didn't, not at first. Antares was still high in the sky when he reached the outskirts of the ruined city, and he kept carefully within the taller clumps of grasses. He could see the Murkies everywhere, and almost universally they were fighting. They seemed to join battle and to quit it on the slightest provocation, even with no provocation at all. Once Chambers crept close to one of the melees, to a wild free-for-all which pitted half a dozen of the giant reptiles one against the other, without order, without pattern, without plan.

Chambers tuned in his scanner. The machine had its limitations: it could only translate concepts which were meaningful to both cultures. He listened: "If it's nice tomorrow, we can destroy Gurru's house... Damn, that hurt! Step on my callous, will you?"

"No. Gurru is away on vacation. He'd want to get in on the fun himself.... Careful, careful. I'll break your neck—"

"The Administration plans mass destruction on Dnipotok--Day. Can you imagine? Three hundred houses in one shindig! Get the hell off my callous! I'll rip out your bloated tongue, you oaf—"

"Hey, cut it out, you guys. They're taking down the Government Building today. You want to watch, don't you? Leave go of my arm, or—"

"Nuts! I haven't been hurt all afternoon. Bunch of weaklings, that's what you are.... Ouch!"

The particular Murky which mouthed that last bit must have been sorry. In a moment, the other five had united against him and they were pounding his head into the mud and he kept on threatening to tear out their tongues, although Chambers knew it would be quite impossible for the reptile in question to do anything of the kind at the moment.

This was madness, this was getting him nowhere, and in a moment he shut off his scanner and proceeded on his way around the periphery of the city. He chuckled softly to himself. So he wanted to be a student of anthropology, to understand before he acted. A trained anthropologist whose specialty was intelligent reptile life could spend twenty years here and come away with a lot of questions.

To his left was the tranquil countryside, and to his right the city was in ruins. It had not been deserted: It was a crowded and bustling metro-

polis, but most of the buildings were at least in partial states of destruction. Some were being torn down, and others, brand new and glistening, had raised their proud spires only partially, were obviously being constructed. But paradoxically, most of these had been gutted by some form of bombardment, so that although Chambers was convinced the Murkies were not at war with anyone, that clearly seemed to be the case.

He walked a bit further and he came to another struggling knot of the reptiles. He smiled wryly and he told himself that he was a fool, but he tuned in his scanner again. After all, there was nothing else he could do.

At first he heard nothing: these particular Murkies seemed too intent upon their struggles to mouth anything beyond groans, grunts and hisses, but presently one of them said: "By Dnipotok Day, I'm bored. There just isn't a damned thing to do."

"That's pretty insulting, Runx. I hurt you three times this morning, and I can do it again this afternoon, you weak, no good—"

"Enough! I didn't want to, but you forced me. I must rip out your tongue, Ow!"

"Bored, eh? Ingrate! Hey, fellows, Runx is bored."

Everyone ganged up on the green and white striped Murky which was Runx.

It hit Chambers so suddenly that it left him feeling giddy. He stood there for a moment and he laughed. Everything became clear all at once. The pieces of the puzzle fit together where they would not fit together before, thanks to Runx. Runx was bored—and that did it. On Earth some day he would feel like building a shrine to Runx....

He stood there laughing, and he was not aware of the noise he made. Soon a few of the Murkies turned to

him. One said: "Ooo. Another one of our sky-friends. Hit him, hit him!"

They advanced, and Chambers smiled. He knew he would have no trouble handling a few of them at a time—as long as they did not press down upon him in overwhelming numbers, he was all right. His muscles were accustomed to a pull of gravity three times as strong as what they felt now, so he would be a veritable superman.

The first Murky reached him and Chambers grinned. All at once, the whole situation had become ludicrous to him—provided he was right. All the Murkies in the area were converging on him....

HE GRABBED the first one about the shoulders and swung the ridiculously light body into the air. He whirled it once over his head and he cried: "Hello from the men of the sky!" Then he hurled the body away from him, into the vanguard of those advancing.

The scanner, of course, worked both ways. "Hello yourself, friend. What gives with your companions?" one of the Murkies demanded. "Hostile creatures, damned anti-social, that's what. We're keeping them around just to see, hut so far they've been unfriendly as hell. Are they sick? Ouch!"

Chambers lifted this particular Murky high over his head, whirling him in the air until he screamed, "Terrific, terrific! Put me down or I'll rip off your stupid thin skin!"

"Bring my friends to me, misshapen toad!"

"Ugly livid white mammal, giant mammal; I'll kill you, that's what I'll do. You really want those morons?"

"You bet your life I want them!" Chambers hurled this Murky away from him also and he turned over three times before he came to rest in the mud.

After a time he sat up and be called to Chambers: "You mean you really want those morons? Really?"

"Yeah," Chambers said wearily. He was throwing around more of the Murkies than he could count. "I want them, fast. And I also want some steel. Plenty of steel. You have it?"

"Have it? Imbecile!"

"I asked you a question, idiotic toad." Chambers threw another Murky after the one he was addressing.

"Of course we have it, ugliness. How much do you need?"

"Plenty," Chambers said, laughing. "Hurry up and bring it, or I'll break you in half."

"Would you, would you? Really? Ouch! Okay, I'll bring it, and your friends, though Dnipotok knows why you want those hostile creatures..."

A weird procession made its way back from the city towards the injured *Sirius Sue*. Smith and Peterson walked unmolested in a group of the Murkies, the members of which constantly fought with one another. Up ahead, another group—also fighting—wheeled some machinery which was almost solid steel and which could be melted down and recast to fit the *Sirius Sue*'s hull perfectly. And still further ahead, Chambers walked with half a dozen of the Murkies, fighting with them and throwing them around all the way.

THE *SIRIUS SUE* purred off into space, its engines humming sweetly.

"I don't understand," said Peterson.

Jenks growled, "Just be glad you're not dead."

"Dead?" Smith demanded. "They never tried to kill us. Didn't lay a finger on us, except to capture us. Then, after that, they just didn't let us go, that's all. But they fed us and they didn't hurt us. I don't get it."

"They'd have kept you there for-

ever," Chambers said.

"How's that?"

"They never would have let you go. They would have kept you just to see if you would be as hostile as you were at the beginning."

"Hostile?" said Peterson. "We didn't do a thing."

"That's just it. They wanted you to. They wanted to have you fight. They didn't understand when you refused—"

"Whoa! Slow down." This was Captain Jenks. "You may understand, Doug; but not the rest of us."

"It's easy. You had to be a student, like I said. As for your Interstellar Ordinance, Jenks, well, I told you what you could do with it. What it fails to take into account is the particular culture with which you're dealing—in this case, the Murkies."

"So?"

"So I didn't get it at first, either. Here was a peaceful world—harmless, quiet, as tranquil a planet as ever you'd see. Only one major form of life, and only one city full of them. No enemies, natural or otherwise. For all we know, not even any harmful bacteria. They lived and they died with no environmental challenge whatever. Think of it, try it if you could: you'd go nuts."

No one said anything. They waited for Chambers to continue, but he only smiled.

Peterson said: "You mean that's what happened? They were crazy?"

"I didn't say that. Insanity is relative. They were perfectly sane. But they had to be hostile. They had to be hostile to one another, to everything with which they came into contact. There was no natural challenge for them on this world, so they had to create an artificial one or perish. It was the keynote of their culture. To behave yourself properly, you had to fight all the time. If you didn't you

were a misfit, a moron, an imbecile.

"Take mankind in the beginning. A hostile environment: humanity had to band together to meet its challenge. Two men got together and they'd throw down their weapons and shake hands—to show each other that they meant no harm, that they were weaponless and could not hurt each other. It's persisted through the ages: we still shake hands."

"Uh-huh," Jenks said, scratching his head.

"The Murkies tread a different path. I didn't get it at first. I saw the peaceful world, just like you three did, but the hostile Murkies didn't fit—that is, not until I heard one of the damned things say he was bored. Then I knew. If they were bored they'd have nothing to do. They'd go crazy in a completely peaceful world.

"First mankind had its hostile Earthly environment, and we've conquered that pretty well. Now we have the stars—a whole galaxy of challenge to keep us busy, and maybe some day the other galaxies. So we shake hands when we meet.

"The Murkies fight instead. They need challenge to keep them going: every culture does. But they have no troubles. Nothing. They create it themselves: they greet each other with obscene epithets, they fight all the time, they constantly tear down and rebuild their city. That way they have something to do.

"They couldn't understand us. We seemed hostile. They wanted to fight,

but we tried to be polite. The concept was one which they could not understand: the universal sign for peace isn't so universal. When you went out that first day, Smith, you should have pasted one of them in the mouth. That they would have understood."

Jenks was thoughtful for a moment, then he said: "You mean mankind took one road because of his hostile environment, a road which by and large was peaceful because he had his challenges elsewhere, in other groups of men, his natural animal enemies, cold weather, and things like that. But the Murky had none of these things with which to contend, so he took the other road, he had to fight all the time. With his brother, with his sister, with anyone and everything..."

Chambers nodded. "Yeah, something like that." Abruptly, he stood up, grinning, and threw his pack of cigarettes at Peterson. "The Murkies were being polite when they threw stones at us: they were perfectly willing to cooperate, only they had to understand us first.

"Hey, Peterson! Damn it, I'm hungry. How's about some food?"

Peterson, who doubled as cook, went to the galley on the double. He grinned back over his shoulder.

"You're a lousy Murky, Doug. That's what you are."

Still grinning, Chambers threw a tin pot after his pack of cigarettes, and Peterson scurried on into the galley.



THERE'S NO WAY OUT!

By William P. McGivern

"Going up?" said the elevator operator. This question was to haunt Leland Gray for eternity, for in this building, you either went up, or . . .



SOMETIMES THE abnormal takes the most commonplace of forms, Sidney Wells thought, as he stared with annoyance at the skyscrapers on the opposite side of the busy, crowded street. He looked again at the card in his hand which listed, innocently enough, a man's name and a business address: Frank Ellsworth, 10 East Fifth Avenue.

The trouble was there was no 10 East Fifth Avenue. Sidney had been up and down the block several times looking for it, but to no avail. Ten minutes ago he had called his secretary and asked her to check Frank Ellsworth's address in their files. It was 10 East Fifth Avenue.

Really, it was ridiculous, he thought. Ellsworth was an insurance prospect, a good one. He had called Sidney to make this appointment and, in the insurance business, that much interest was usually a sign that the sale would be made without much trouble. And now, because of this irritating confusion about the address, he was al-

ready late for the appointment. Maybe the delay would give Ellsworth time to change his mind. Or he might go out to lunch or a meeting and then, as those things happened, not be available again for weeks.

Sidney turned and, with an air of determination, walked back to the nearest intersection where a policeman was directing traffic. On the way, he planned how he could explain his tardiness to Ellsworth. Make a joke of it, perhaps. Or tell the plain silly truth. That might be better. But who would buy insurance from a man who couldn't find an address? Then he took comfort from the thought that it was Ellsworth's own card which had given him all the trouble. There was the angle. No criticism of Ellsworth, of course, but pointing out that you couldn't be sure of anything in this world. Except death and taxes, of course. That's why an adequate insurance program was essential to every forward-looking, progressive executive. Then...

HE WAS beside the policeman. "Pardon me, Officer, but I'm looking for 10 East Fifth Avenue." He smiled, good-humoredly, and with just enough self-deprecation to make the patrolman feel expansive. "Without much luck, I might admit." Sidney had been a salesman for so long that unconsciously, as he breathed and slept and tied his shoes, he made friends of people. Not friends really, in the sense that they liked him or would do anything for him, but at least he got a pleasant reaction from people most of the time.

"Well, no wonder," the patrolman said. "Somebody gave you a bum steer. There's no 10 East Fifth Avenue. Who're you looking for?"

"A man named Ellsworth."

"Afraid I don't know him. I know

lots of businessmen in this block. Been on this beat for sixteen years."

Sidney went away feeling more and more nettled. This was the sort of thing that just didn't happen to him. His motto was, "Take care of the little problems, and you won't have any big ones." His filing system, and check-up system, were models of order and efficiency. On top of that, Sidney cross-indexed all his clients and prospects by occupation, religion, hobbies, clubs, and so forth. Then when he met a checker-playing enthusiast, he could go back to his files, find other checker-players there, and toss their names into his next interview with the new prospect. He never missed appointments, or forgot first names, or left his rate book at home. Even if he was going to a movie he took the rate book along, because you never could tell, you might get talking to the person sitting next to you, or to someone in the lobby, or even the ticket taker. They were all prospects. That was why this present impasse was so frustrating. If he were a careless person, it might be expected, or at least tolerated.

He walked back down the block, frowning at the numbers, and then, abruptly, there it was: Number 10 East Fifth Avenue.

IT WAS a tall white building, with revolving doors, conventional in all respects. Sidney's relief was tempered by a sense of confusion. Surely he must have passed this entrance ten times looking for it.

And how about the cop? No such number, he'd said. Sidney made a mental note to drop a line to the commissioner about that. With a last glance at his watch, he hurried through the revolving doors.

The directory surprised him, and added to his confusion. There were names on it, plenty of them, but not

Ellsworth's; and there were no floor numbers opposite the names. Also, the names weren't in alphabetical order. Sidney walked through the expensive looking lobby to the bank of elevators. There he talked with the starter, a dumpy balding man in a blue uniform.

"I'm looking for a man named Ellsworth," he said. "He's in the trucking business. Could you tell me his floor and office number, please?"

"You'll have to check the directory," the starter said, pleasantly enough. "I can't remember all our tenant's names and offices. It's just back there near the revolving doors."

"But it's no help," Sidney said.

"No help? What do you mean?"

"Well, there aren't any floor numbers or office numbers on it. Also, Ellsworth's name isn't there. It's the damndest directory I've ever seen."

"Hmnn, that's odd. Of course, things change around here pretty fast. Maybe the building manager had the directory changed. He's like that. But I haven't had any other complaints. Tell you what: Take any car and go up to the tenth floor. There's an information booth there, and they can probably straighten you out."

"Thanks very much," Sidney said in a relieved voice, and hurried into the nearest elevator. Now he was on the right track at last. Sidney had a positive affection for information counters. Occasionally, as he walked through a department store or railroad station, he would stop at the information counter and ask a few questions for the fun of it. He appreciated the quick alert answers, and the feeling that here was Knowledge, confined and indexed, waiting to serve him.

HE TOLD the elevator operator he wanted to get off at the tenth floor, and the man said, "Yes,

sir!" and closed the doors with a sharp click. They shot up silently, swiftly, and then the doors slid open.

"Thank you very much," Sidney said. He stepped out into a corridor that was empty except for a worried looking little man who was standing by a hand truck.

"Pardon me," Sidney said. "Could you tell me where the information booth is?"

"Information booth?" The little man shook his head with a thoughtful frown. "I never heard of one on this floor."

Sidney felt his blood pressure rising. "Now see here, this is ridiculous. The starter told me there was an information counter up here."

"Well, you can't pay too much attention to what he says," the little man said. "At least I don't." He laughed and rubbed his head with a gesture of humorous resignation. "An information counter is what I need, to tell the truth. Look here now." Nodding at the hand truck which was loaded with eight cardboard boxes, he said, "I'm supposed to deliver these to a man named Smith. Now, you tell me how I'm going to do it."

Sidney had the sort of mind that was sympathetic to any sort of trouble—particularly if it were someone else's. "Well, what's so difficult about that?" he asked. "What's Smith's office number?"

"That's just it," the little man said triumphantly. "I don't have his number. And neither does my boss. He just sent me out to find Smith."

"Perhaps the nature of the merchandise will be a clue," Sidney said, in the jocular tone he used with menials. He opened one of the boxes and blinked when he found it empty. "There's nothing in these boxes," he said, shaking his head.

"Sure, I know that," the little man said. "Makes it tough, doesn't it?"

"I suppose so," Sidney agreed. He was suddenly shaken with a sense of confusion. "How long have you been looking for Smith? Why don't you go back to your office and get the right address?"

"Hmmpbf. They won't know anything there. I been after Smith for six months now, and the way it looks, I'll be after him six years before I find him. But I can't stand here all day and waste my time. Got to be getting on. Goodbye."

Sidney watched in puzzled silence as the man moved off at a shuffling gait, pushing the truck ahead of him, and glancing at the numbers on the doors he passed.

SUDDENLY, SIDNEY was angry.

This nonsense was ceasing to be funny. He'd go back to that stupid starter and get this matter straightened out once and for all. Time was money, and he was wasting it like a spendthrift. Or, rather, this silly building was wasting it for him. In a mood of cold determination, Sidney punched the bell for the elevator. The doors slid open almost instantly.

"Going up?"

"No, I'm going down!" Sidney said.

The elevator operator, a young man with black hair and large eyes, looked at him curiously. "Down, sir?"

"Yes, that's what I said."

"But our elevators don't run down, sir," the young man said, as if stating a simple, well-known fact. "We only go up."

"Now see here, young man, this impudence is going to get you in serious trouble," Sidney cried, thoroughly enraged. "How do people get out of this blasted building if the elevators don't run down?"

The young man looked honestly puzzled. "When people leave, they go up to the lobby and out into the street."

"They go up to the lobby and out into the street, eh?" Sidney said in a controlled but trembling voice. "Take me to the manager of this building then, please. I've got a lot to talk to that person about." He stepped into the elevator, his arms crossed at a determined angle.

"Why, of course, sir!"

They went swiftly upward for a half dozen floors, and then the elevator came to a smooth stop. "Here you are, sir," the young man said, as the doors opened. "It's just to the right."

"Thank you!" Sidney's voice was cold with sarcasm.

He strode to the right down a well-lighted, wide corridor. There were doors on either side, with numbers and firm names on them. But after walking to the end of the corridor, Sidney couldn't find the Building Manager's office. He retraced his steps slowly, frowning and angry. Another stupid error! Couldn't these people get one thing straight! You asked for one thing, they told you another. They sent you off on wild-goose chases, wasted your time scandalously, and talked gibberish about elevators that only ran up. It was a crying shame that such a place should be so horribly mismanaged. Emboldened by his sense of outrage, he opened the next door on his right, on which was printed the sign: "Courtley Bros. Attorneys."

THREE SOLEMN-FACED men sitting at a round table glanced up at him with polite interest.

"Please forgive me for harging in this way," Sidney said, "but I'm looking for the manager of the building. The elevator man said it was on this floor, but obviously—"

"Sit down, please," one of the men said in a grave voice. He was middle-aged, and dressed somberly in gray. His skull was pink and bald with a

corona of white hair about the edge. "We were discussing some matters pertaining to a rather large estate."

Unwillingly, Sidney took the fourth chair at the round, polished table. "I hate to intrude, but I've been having a time of it getting around in this building."

The men regarded him politely, but with no show of understanding.

"I mean, things seem frightfully confused here," Sidney said.

"I hadn't noticed it," one of the men said. "But let's get back to business. You feel, then, we should sell all of the common stock?"

The question was evidently addressed to Sidney. They all waited for his answer.

"Now, see here—" Sidney began.

But got no further. "Well, we'll consider it settled then," the bald-headed man said, giving him a warm smile.

"But this is a mistake," Sidney said. "You're confusing me with someone else. I've never seen any of you before in my life. I'm an insurance man. I don't know anything about this estate you're talking about." His voice was high with desperation, and there was sweat on his brow.

"Well, that's as it should be," one of the men observed, and his companions nodded in agreement.

Sidney felt he was among mad men. "Please, can you tell me how to get to the Building Manager's office. That's the only reason I stopped in here. You see—"

"Why, of course," one of the men interrupted. It's down two flights, but you'll have to walk, I'm afraid. You see, the elevators don't run down."

Sidney jumped to his feet and bolted through the door. Outside, he mopped his perspiring forehead, while panic and reason fought for control of his senses. Reason, after a long

battle, won out. His pulses subsided, and he drew a deep breath. Two floors down, they'd said. Well, he'd give it a try. And if he ran into any more monkeyshines, he'd just clear out. He recalled the date, June 11th. Nothing wrong with that. If it had been April Fool's day, he'd have had his answer to this nonsense. But on a normal day in June, it was totally inexplicable.

SIDNEY PROWLED along the corridor until he found a door with the words 'STAIRWAY' painted on it. He pushed it open and trotted briskly down two flights of cement stairs. There, he tried a steel door with glazed glass windows set in the upper half. It was locked.

Sidney's patience and nerve broke. He swore wildly and hammered on the door. What was wrong? Had everyone suddenly gone mad? Was there no sense or order left in the world? As these questions wheeled wildly in his mind, he continued his blows on the door.

But there was no answer. Then suddenly, after an interval of fruitless hammering on the door, Sidney's brain began to function intelligently again. He stopped pounding the door and collected himself into a reasoning unit once more. Very well, he thought, I'll clear out of this madhouse. I've tried my best to get some sensible cooperation, but to no avail. I'll walk down these steps to the lobby, if it takes me two hours. And then I'll step out of this building and call it good riddance. Fortified by this plan of action, Sidney started briskly down the stairs. One flight, two flights, three, he took the steps two at a time, feeling that every minute was bringing him closer to sanity and escape.

Then the stairs ended against a blank wall.

Sidney was too stunned for an instant to do anything but stare in pop-eyed incredulity at this barrier.

"It's—it's ridiculous," he whispered. "It—it doesn't make sense."

He felt the rough cement wall with the tip of his fingers, pushed against it with his shoulder, and studied it from floor to ceiling for some crack or aperture that would indicate the presence of an opening or a door. But there was none. He could go no further. He was trapped. Vainly, he attempted to guess what floor he was on. He had gone originally to the tenth. Then up an undetermined number of floors, and down two. Then down three more. Up ten, up X, and down five. Where did that leave him? There was no way of telling. And even if he knew, what good would that do?

Sidney toiled upward to the next floor and tried the door. It swung inward and he stepped into a wide, well-lighted corridor that was precisely like the others he had seen in the building.

A MAN IN a gray, double-breasted suit was walking toward him, whistling aimlessly. He was a slender man, about fifty, with rosy cheeks, and a thin inquiring face. He wore a flower in his buttonhole, and exuded an air of jaunty well-being.

"Pardon me, sir," Sidney said. "Could you direct me to the manager of this building?"

"Why certainly! I'm the manager of the building. What did you wish to see me about?"

Sidney almost fainted with relief. He smiled and patted his damp brow with his handkerchief. "I've had quite a time finding you," he said.

"Well, that's too bad." The manager had a sympathetic voice. "You should have inquired of someone. Practically anyone in the building

could have told you where I could be reached. But come along. We'll step into my office."

"Fine," Sidney said.

They walked the length of the corridor and turned right. There, twenty feet from the intersection, were two camp chairs. The manager sat down in one and waved Sidney to the other. Sidney looked up and down the corridor, and again the overwhelming sense of confusion swept over him. "This is your office?"

"Why, yes. I move about frequently, so this arrangement suits me perfectly. Now, what is it you wish to talk about?"

Sidney sat down and crossed his legs. His manner was determined and righteous. "I have a rather serious complaint to bring to your attention. First, your directory is totally valueless. Secondly, the elevator starter in the lobby is either a liar or a moron. Thirdly, your elevator operators are impudent and—"

"I'm afraid I can't remember all of that at one time," the manager said. "Let's start again. What was that about the directory?"

"It makes no sense. The names aren't in alphabetical order. And there are no office numbers listed."

The manager frowned slightly. "Well, I see nothing unusual in that. But go on."

SIDNEY POUNDED a knee with his fist. "Nothing unusual, eh? Well, how do people find their way around, tell me that?"

"Have you met any other people who seemed lost?" the manager inquired in a soft voice.

"Well...no," Sidney admitted slowly. "But take that starter. He told me there was an information booth on the tenth floor. You know very well there isn't."

"No? Well, there might have been,

you know."

"There might have been! Is that the way you run this building?"

"But why not? Frankly, I don't see where you have any legitimate complaints, sir. All of these things you've mentioned are quite usual and customary here. But what was that about the elevator operator?"

"He wouldn't take me *down*! He said your elevators don't run down." Sidney's voice had taken on a high and trembling note.

"He was quite right."

"Well, how do I get out?"

"You go up, of course, and walk out the lobby, the same way you came in."

"I didn't come in the top of your blasted building!" Sidney screamed. "I'm no bird. I came in at the bottom."

"Oh, dear me." The manager regarded Sidney with an odd expression of curiosity and pity. "You came in from the bottom, eh?"

"Yes, I came in at the bottom." Sidney's voice had lost its pitch and volume. He repeated the manager's question in a dull hopeless voice.

"Well, that's interesting," the manager said. "Somebody should have fixed that doorway, I suppose. It's caused trouble before. Tell you what: You wait here and I'll go off and see what I can do for you. Won't be a minute."

He smiled and walked briskly away. Sidney smoked a cigarette and waited. Time passed slowly. Twenty minutes, thirty minutes, an hour. There were eight cigarette stubs on the floor at Sidney's feet.

He jumped to his feet, cursing under his breath, and strode off in the direction the manager had taken. Turning a corner, he bumped into a man who carried a blanket over his arm.

"Do you know where I might find

the building manager?" Sidney said.

"At his home, I suppose," the man answered. "He left here about an hour ago."

"When will he be back?"

"That's an odd question," the man said, grinning. "He won't be back at all, of course."

"Won't be back at all?"

"Of course not. His job ended today."

"He's retired?"

"I suppose you could say that. He's had the blooming job all day. That's enough for a man, I say."

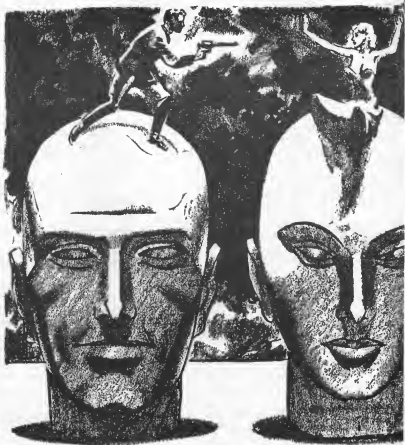
"You mean he's only the manager for one day?"

"That's the rule, as you should know. Goodbye."

SIDNEY WAS left alone in the clean empty corridor. His mind was spinning slowly and effortlessly. He knew he should be angry—but at what? Vaguely, he realized that there were things he should be doing, action to be taken, to get out of this monstrous area of insanity. But everything was vague. That was the trouble. It was also the blessing. Not knowing sharply and precisely what to do, he could do nothing.

From somewhere came an earlier thought of his: *Sometimes the abnormal takes the most commonplace of forms.* What did that mean? Also, skirting his consciousness, was the manager's bland comment: *Somebody should have fixed that doorway...*

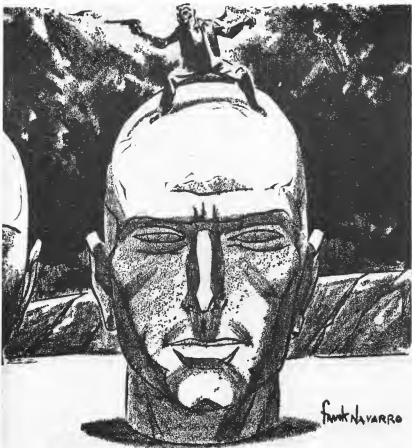
Through his comfortably vague thoughts came a vision as sharp as a needlepoint. A vision of doorways, strange but familiar, innocent but dangerous, into which people with address cards in their hands walked confidently and blindly. In every city, in every country, there might be such doorways—doorways that hadn't been fixed!



The Girl In The

By Chester S. Geier

If beautiful hair is a girl's crowning glory, it was now obvious that Zelda Jardine had been gloriously crowned . . .



Golden Wig

THE SIDEWALK stretched away with an eerie desertion and quiet under the street lamps, one segment of the concrete labyrinth that was the sleeping city—

a labyrinth that for Shannon had no particular beginning and no particular end. And in a horribly real sense he was lost in it.

He walked with his head down and

his big hands thrust deep into the pockets of his trenchcoat, his teeth set hard on the stem of the unlighted pipe between his lips. He felt restless and driven, yet without purpose, somehow haunted. A man goaded by impulses he could not explain, by urges he found baffling and unfathomable. A man lost. A man from nowhere, going nowhere.

His mouth twisted wryly around the pipestem. That, he thought, was what the combined effects of insomnia, fatigue and damp, early morning air did to a man. It made him morbid—poetically morbid, which probably was even worse.

Things weren't so bad, were they? He had a sort of identity, one completely satisfying to those he knew. An identity which would have been more than satisfying to any other owner—anyone but himself. Edward Shannon....Not a bad name. People seemed to like it, seemed to like the man it belonged to. So that was all right. And he had a nice job, an important and well-paid job. Meyrick and Brandt was an engineering firm with money and prestige—and excellent political connections. You had to be good to work for Meyrick and Brandt. You had to have training and ability, personality and a certain kind of strength. He had all that, it seemed. And he had nice friends, a nice apartment. He had things to do and places to go, if that was what he needed.

What more could a man want?

Someone to come home to, maybe? Someone to set out his pipe and slippers and chatter to him about the small events of the day, about the price of meat and the cute hat in the window at Field's?

There was that, yes. But—

What in hell did he want?

The answer wasn't here. It wasn't to be found on this deserted street, not at two o'clock in the morning, if

ever. It wasn't to be found at Meyrick and Brandt, and it wasn't to be found at his nice apartment. It wasn't to be found among his circle of nice friends. He was certain of that; he had carefully and subtly questioned them.

The answer wasn't to be found anywhere, it seemed. That was the hell of it. A living hell. *Or a living lie?*

Maybe he was nuts, just plain nuts. The thought chilled him, even though this was not the first time it had occurred.

Maybe he was yearning after voices to tell him things, the things he couldn't find any other way. If he yearned hard enough, maybe he'd begin hearing them.

His lips twitched with wan humor, the chill still gripping him. Voices, yet.... Down at Meyrick and Brandt they didn't like engineers who heard voices—not unless they came from a special pipeline to Washington.

Full-cycle, he thought. Back where we started from. Sadder, but no wiser. A little more tired, but not much more sleepy.

He sighed. Get along home, little dogey, and stop chasing your tail. Home, and a couple of straight slugs of Old Forester. That ought to work the trick. Alcohol on top of fatigue ought to stop all the wondering, all the questions, all the doubt. Alcohol was the key to oblivion; a key he'd been using a little too often of late. Down at Meyrick and Brandt they didn't mind alcohol, not much, not if a man carried it well. A little alcohol, in fact, was expected.

Meyrick and Brandt. He always got back to Meyrick and Brandt. One of the fleas on the tail he chased.

Somewhere not far away, he heard a car door slam. There were quick, light footsteps, the kind of footsteps a woman would make.

Sounds from another world, heard by ears that didn't seem to be his own. Car doors had a habit of slamming. Women were often in a hurry. Maybe they were in the habit of being in a hurry. There were a lot of pipes and slippers to fetch, a lot of meat to buy, a lot of hats to look at in a lot of windows besides Field's.

He saw the corner materialize suddenly, as if it hadn't been there all along and his feet taking him toward it. Fast. Faster than he had known he was moving. Grab that Old Forester. Grab that tiger. No, that wasn't quite right, was it?

The corner, and his feet took him around it automatically. Why not? It was his corner. It was also a lot of other people's corner, but at two o'clock in the morning with the street deserted it was his corner. Why not? Wasn't possession nine points of the law?

No—it wasn't his corner after all. The girl wanted it, too, wanted it badly. She had been moving toward it even faster than he was moving.

He heard her startled gasp, and then he felt the softness of her against him and smelled her perfume. There wasn't too much perfume and what there was of it seemed expensive. A high-grade sort of perfume, noticeable but not glaringly conspicuous.

He staggered. She was a dead weight against him. He staggered a little more and turned and had the building against his side. That steadied him. A well-constructed building always did. Whoa! This was no time to go off half-cocked. You have a woman on your hands, Shannon. A woman on whom men—or a certain type of men—did not consider expensive, high-grade perfume a waste. Let's be gallant. Meyrick and Brandt not only expected that, too; they demanded it.

The girl was obviously well-constructed and certainly not as heavy as the building. He had the leverage and certainly the strength. The rest was easy. Meyrick and Brandt damned well should be proud of him.

He had his hands under her arms and he set her back on her feet. No—the expensive, high grade perfume wasn't a waste. It wasn't good enough. There would be few things good enough for this type of girl.

But what drained the breath out of him was her hair, that very special sort of blonde hair that goes with the best perfume. Her hair had slipped. It had slipped badly. It was halfway back on her head. He could see the rounded expanse of white, gleaming naked skin that curved up from her forehead.

She gasped again, more softly, and her slender hands sparkled briefly with rings and bracelets as they flashed up to her exposed skull. Exposed? Betrayed. That was the word. She evidently had seen his shock, the direction of his gaze. She didn't like being exposed, didn't like the discovery that she was. He didn't, either—oddly enough. She was too beautiful. In her black evening dress and ermine wrap she was too perfect. You wanted always to see her perfect. You always wanted to see her—period. To keep looking at her, never to let her go.

Shannon swallowed with effort. The best perfume, the very best. He'd gladly buy it by the gallon, gladly. Gallons of it, oceans of it.

Damned fool, you damned fool. What makes you think you'd ever get the chance? Your salary at Meyrick and Brandt was good, but not that good. This girl didn't know you, most likely wouldn't want to know you. She was just someone you ran into around a corner once in a lifetime. Once in a lifetime, and you'd never

forget it, though you'd better start forgetting it fast. Fast. Look what she did to you, damned fool.

He was breathing hard and trembling. He licked at his lips and realized distantly that his pipe was gone. He was naked, too, betrayed. He looked away. You didn't watch a girl straightening her lovely blonde wig the way she'd straighten a showing slip or a crooked stocking seam. It just wasn't done. It especially wasn't done by anyone from Meyrick and Brandt.

Looking away wasn't enough. He wanted to move. He had to move. There was a straining and a pushing inside him, urgent, insistent.

"Zell! Zell!"

A man's voice, and a man's footsteps. Shannon became aware that he had been hearing footsteps for a second or two. There had been even the sound of a car door slamming. He was back down to earth, now. Heaven was far away—or only as far as it took to turn your head and look once more at the angel who was adjusting her blonde wig.

He didn't do that. He did what seemed the second best thing and peered around the corner.

The boyfriend was tall, husky, hatless and wore evening clothes. His face was momentarily shadowed, but it would be a face that went with a man of distinction. It would go with thick, softly waving gray hair.

"Zell! Wait—please! Let me apologize." A cultured voice, as cultured and hurried as the black patent evening shoes that gleamed in short, swift arcs along the sidewalk. But not too cultured, maybe. Not so cultured that a girl didn't have to run.

Shannon felt soft movement against him and smelled the perfume again. She was looking around the corner, too. She had adjusted her wig, and now she was ready for business.

She laughed, a brief, clear silvery

chiming. "Never mind, Les. I've just met an old friend, and he'll see me home."

The boyfriend stopped short. He saw the girl, and now he saw Shannon. He stood looking, plainly startled and not willing to accept what he saw.

"Zell, I—" His hands lifted indecisively and fell back against his sides. "If you're sure you'll be all right..."

"I'm as safe as I would be with you, Les," the girl returned. She laughed again. "Maybe safer... 'Night, Les. Thanks for everything."

Shannon felt a tug on his arm and heard her voice close beside him, pitched more softly. "Do you mind?"

"No," he said. "No." He wanted to make it emphatic, but there were no other words he could find just then, and he repeated the only one he had in a frantic effort to make his willingness absolutely clear.

"We'll go this way," she said. "And thanks ever so much."

"It's all right. Glad to."

They started back in the direction from which Shannon had come.

THEY REACHED the middle of the block, walking hand in arm like old friends. She was silent. She would be occupied with the thought of escape. All he could think of was the light pressure of her fingers in the crook of his elbow and the smooth ease of her stride in the high-heeled evening slippers. Once in a lifetime, and all it cost was a pipe. No gallons of perfume, but if there was a chance...

He felt a change in her movements. She turned and was looking back over one shoulder. He looked, too, and saw the boyfriend standing on the corner, one hand lifted to scratch the back of his thick, gently waving gray hair. A puzzled man, an unhappy

man, maybe a cheated man. What did it matter? He could always drown himself in his perfume.

Their heads swung back, then, and their glances met. She looked at him keenly, as though really seeing him for the first time. They were passing a lamp, and he saw the swift, impish curving of her red lips.

"I hope this isn't too much of an inconvenience."

"No," he said. "I wish it would happen to me more often."

"That's nice." Her smile seemed to soften as the impishness left it. "You're nice, too. Sometimes a girl . . . Well, it was one of those things. I needed badly to adopt a friend."

"Yes," Shannon said.

"You just happened to be on hand. You really don't mind, do you?"

"Gallons of perfume," Shannon began, and broke off, guilty and dismayed. He sensed her questioning look.

"A . . . a sort of pun," he explained lamely. "This wouldn't be the right time for it."

They reached the end of the block in silence and turned the corner. The lights were brighter here, there were moving cars and the show windows glowed.

"You wouldn't care to tell me your name? As an adopted friend?"

She was looking up at him. Her eyes were green, or maybe blue. He couldn't tell, but they were some vivid shade that was one or the other. Her features and her skin were as perfect as they had to be to go with the rest of her. They made him think of a pearl. They had the perfection of a pearl, and the whiteness and the soft, vital underlying color. Her face, he thought, was a jewel in a golden nest. He said, "I haven't been trying to keep my name secret. It's Shannon—Ed to friends and people who adopt me."

"Mine is Zelda Jardine." Her delicately arching brows lifted. "Does that explain the wig?"

"Why," he said, faltering, "I haven't—"

"Zelda Jardine," she said. "And *High in the Blue*. I make three changes of wigs for my different numbers—blonde, brunette, redhead." She grinned with an echo of her earlier impishness. "It's refreshing to meet someone who isn't connected with show business, who doesn't know show people—or who doesn't prey on show people."

"I've heard of *High in the Blue*, and I should have connected you with it. Guess I haven't been keeping up with things lately."

"Somebody's been missing something, and I don't mean the show I'm in. Though it's drawing the cash customers very nicely, thank you."

They talked more easily now. He could have kept talking and walking until dawn, but their steps ate up the distance around the block and back toward the approximate point from which she had fled the gray-haired man's car.

She stopped before the entrance to a tall elegantly modernistic apartment hotel. "Home," she said. "Safe and sound. Thanks ever so much." Her voice was soft, her vivid eyes suddenly grave.

"I enjoyed being adopted," Shannon said. He hesitated. "Well . . . good-night."

What else could he say? That he wanted to see her again, that he wanted to talk to her—that there were questions she might be able to answer?

He could so easily be wrong. She might so easily not know the answers. And if he were wrong, it would be another case of East being East and West being West and the twain never meeting. It would be a case of moving

in different worlds. No, not different. The same world. But—

He needed time. The piece of a puzzle had been dropped in his lap, and he had to see where it fitted—if it wasn't just an illusion, something he thought was there, but which would be gone when he looked again. He needed time. He needed those slugs of Old Forester. He needed to sit down and get hold of his thoughts and keep them from going round and round.

He had, after all, been adopted just for a walk around the block. Better let it go at that. For a while, anyway. Later, maybe—

Whoa, Shannon! Easy, boy!

She seemed to be hesitating, too. Her lovely eyes were watching him. They seemed to sense his decision, his withdrawal from her. They dropped.

"Good-night."

He watched as she entered the building and moved out of sight. The lamp-lit darkness seemed suddenly cold and empty.

SHANNON took off his hat and trenchcoat and put them away in the hall closet. Still frowning in puzzled thought, he started for the kitchenette. The apartment had two and a half rooms, large, attractive rooms in a large, attractive building. A building on the same street as the one where the girl in the blonde wig lived, each separated from the other by little more than a block of total distance and an intersecting boulevard.

Convenient, Shannon thought. Provided, of course...

From a built-in cabinet he took the bottle of Old Forester and a jigger glass. He took the first drink straight, gulping a little at the burn of it down his throat. The second drink he followed with half a tumbler of water.

Well, Shannon? Feel better? That give you a hold on solid earth?

A little. Not much.

He went into the bedroom. He stripped off his tweed jacket, his tie and his shirt. He stood in front of the full-length mirror in the closet door and looked at himself, self-conscious with having known all along that he was going to do this. Then he reached up and pried carefully with his fingernails, carefully along his forehead and temples and the back of his neck.

He removed his crisp-curling brown wig.

The skin of his head was pale and utterly smooth, of course. It had been smooth and barren of hair for as long as he could remember. And how long was that? About two years. Yes, just about two years. Before that there was only—blankness, emptiness, a void. That was the thing that kept throwing him. As far as he knew, he had been alive only for about two years.

Hairlessness was not unusual. Many people were hairless. Any number of things could cause it—a hormone lack, glandular unbalance, illness, disease, shock. But in his case...

He was different. He didn't know exactly how, but he was certain he was different. Deep, deep down, he was certain.

He didn't belong. He had an identity of a sort. He had a name—Edward Shannon. But what's in a name? A name is a label, a tag. It doesn't explain what it is applied to. The word "book" doesn't explain any particular book. Even "fiction book" is vague and uninformative.

In short, he didn't know *who* he actually was—or *what*. There seemed no physically satisfying niche or pigeonhole in which he could place himself. He existed in the world but wasn't part of it. How did that poem

go? That poem...

"...a stranger...in a world I never made."

Yes, that was it. *A stranger. A world I never made.*

But perhaps that wasn't quite right. Down at Meyrick and Brandt he was helping to remake the world. And how long—exactly how long—had he been at Meyrick and Brandt?

The skin on her head had been completely smooth, too, gleamingly, femininely smooth. No fuzz, no suggestion of stubble, no hint of five o'clock shadow. Nothing. That didn't have to be unusual. Her role in *High in the Blue* required three changes of wigs. She could have her head shaved daily, which would be rather drastic. She could even take depilatory treatments, which would be even more drastic. A woman values her hair, even if only in a boyish bob. A woman's hair is her crowning glory.

Zelda Jardine could be different, too. Zelda Jardine.

How did you find out whether a girl actually was different? You started in by colliding with her at a street corner. Early in the morning, if possible, and with a boyfriend in full chase. But after that?

Did you visit her and doff your wig and say, "Beg your pardon, Miss Jardine, but I've got a hunch I'm different. Sub or supernatural, I don't know which. Because of this wig, here, see? And I think you're different, too. Because you wear a wig, too, see? Three of them. So maybe if we put our bare or bewigged heads together, maybe we can figure what this is all about. If anything."

No, you didn't do that, did you? What did you do? Did you go quietly back to your job at Meyrick and Brandt? Did you keep wondering and doubting and walking the streets when you should be sleeping? Did you keep grasping at the shadows

in your mind, the shadows that seemed to have so much to tell, that were so tantalizing, so elusive? Or did you have another couple of slugs of Old Forester and go to bed and try to dream of the angel from *High in the Blue* who made three changes of wigs?

Yes, I suppose you did nothing more than that.

SHANNON was in his office at Meyrick and Brandt at the usual time. He filled and lighted his pipe and read his mail. Then he unlocked one of a row of filing cabinets and took out a sheaf of papers. He went to the drafting department and spoke to several men in succession. He returned to his office with a thick roll of blue prints, which he spread out and tacked down on a large tilted table opposite his desk. Filling and lighting his pipe again, he lost himself in a maze of details.

The door opened, and Lester J. Brandt III put his head in the room. His title of vice president was engraved in bronze behind his words. "I want to see you in my office, Shannon. Right away."

"Sure," Shannon said, and started to weight down his papers before leaving his office.

Lester J. Brandt III had put away his hat and his topcoat and was waiting behind his king-sized mahogany desk. His thick, gently waving gray hair was brushed carefully. He held a silver letter opener, and with this daintily pushed back and forth the pipe that lay on the tooled leather desktop.

"Morning," Shannon said.

Brandt nodded. Behind his desk, now, his title was engraved in steel—cold steel.

"This is your pipe, I believe, Shannon?"

"Yes," Shannon said. "Thanks."

Brandt leaned back in his luxurious chair, watching as Shannon picked up the pipe. His light blue eyes were as icy and hard as his voice. "I didn't know you were acquainted with Zell Jardine, Shannon."

"I never saw her before last night—at least, not in person."

"But she said something about your being an old friend."

Shannon lifted one shoulder. "That was just something she said. I happened to be handy. She adopted me."

Brandt's full lips overlapped in thought, and his thoughts left him dissatisfied. "Frankly, Shannon, it seems...well, it seems quite a coincidence, your being at that particular place, at that particular time."

"I happen to live in the neighborhood. I take a walk almost every night, often quite late at night, and often along the street where Miss Jardine lives. I live on the same street." Shannon had to speak slowly. Other thoughts kept crowding up in his mind, and he had to detour around them.

"Didn't you recognize me?" Brandt demanded, as if the mere fact of his identity should have been of crucial importance. "I thought I knew who you were. I was positive, when I saw your pipe lying on the sidewalk."

Easy, Shannon. Easy. Just keep detouring.

He said, "I thought you looked familiar, but many men look alike at night and from a distance. Many men call out in much the same tone of voice. I wasn't certain, and I didn't have time to find out."

Hell with detouring, he thought suddenly. A man had his pride.

He leaned forward a little under the pressure of a violent inner wind. "I don't get this. I don't see any reason for a third degree. I don't see any reason for getting called out on

the carpet. Miss Jardine got home safely. What happened had no connection with business? It didn't cost the company any money. It doesn't put me under any particular professional obligation to explain what I do outside office hours."

Brandt's eyes had fallen and his face was slightly flushed. He shifted in his chair, his expression mirroring a conflict between outrage and conciliation. He muttered finally: "I suppose I should apologize, Shannon. I have a deep...well, a deep emotional interest in Miss Jardine. I guess I let it get the better of me. I hope you'll overlook the matter."

Shannon nodded. There had been no definite apology, but he wanted none. He was satisfied with a temporary truce.

In a more smoothly affable tone, Brandt went on, "We'll forget the whole affair then. Thanks, Shannon. And by the way, this is entirely between you and me, of course."

"Of course," Shannon said. His eyes rested on Brandt's carefully brushed gray hair for a moment before he turned away. The thought had struck him suddenly. That carefully brushed gray hair... Real—or a wig?

If Zelda Jardine actually were like himself, then there would be others. How many others? Were they people he knew?

Back in his office, Shannon sat down and unclenched his fingers from their aching grip on the pipe. He saw that the bowl had been split in the fall. In a sudden upsurge of the anger he had been fighting down, he hurled the pipe into his wastebasket. It had no value to him anymore. It had been contaminated.

His whole conception of Meyrick and Brandt had been contaminated, too. A short time previously he would have considered it sheer heresy—but

now he felt that something smelled bad about Meyrick and Brandt.

HE COULD see the apartment hotel's brightly illuminated entrance from where he stood between two buildings on the opposite side of the street. Like a candleflame, he thought. And he was a moth, beating his wings around it.

Why risk it, Shannon? Why not leave well enough alone?

Well enough...

What was that? Was it the bell he had been living? Was it being unable to sleep at night and walking the streets, driven, always driven, by the questions he needed so badly to have answered? Was it skulking around like this, like a hashful kid with a crush, hoping for a glimpse of her?

He had seen her twice in the past several days—always at a distance. Once he had seen her in *High in the Blue*. The ticket, purchased from a scalper, had cost plenty. But it had been worth it. The show had been good and had left him with no doubt that she was the reason.

The other time he had seen her being escorted into an expensive car by a man in impeccable evening clothes. A stranger. She would know a lot of men. They would hover about her like moths, too.

But tonight she was alone—alone and at home. Temporarily, of course. Yet, there would be enough time for him to see her while she was still alone, still at home. He had only to cross the street and walk into the building. She would see him. He was certain she would see him.

But once they stood face to face, what would he say? How would he begin? If he were wrong, she would think him crazy. She would refuse to ever see him again. And his private, individual hell would be all the worse.

He didn't know. He was just

guessing. That was the trouble. He could be wrong about her, wrong about himself, wrong about everything.

On the other hand—he might be right after all. She might actually be different—just like he was. And she might be just as puzzled and lost as he was.

Babes in the woods. And as hairless as babes.

But he wouldn't be alone any more. It would be wonderful not to be alone any more.

What to do, Shannon? Make up your mind—if you have one. You can't stay here all night. Someone's going to spot you and call the cops. Cops can ask a lot of embarrassing questions.

He was on a giant clock pendulum, swinging back and forth in great, dizzy arcs. *Tick, tock*. The seconds were years. Centuries were passing.

Make up your mind, Shannon.

Tick, Tock. Back, forth. Yes, no. Go in, stay out.

Make up your mind, Shannon.

He was sweating. He could feel the moisture on his face, under his arms. He could feel the bite of his fingernails in the palms of his hands.

It meant so much, so damned much. Could she possibly understand?

There was such a terrible risk that she wouldn't. Too much of a risk.

Go home, Shannon. Wait a little longer. You've waited this long. What's a few more million years?

He was on the sidewalk, moving blindly, drunkenly. People passed him in a fog, wraiths from another world. He heard laughter, receding and dying away, like a train whistle in the night.

That's it, Shannon. Go home.

Only he wasn't going home. He was crossing the street, walking toward the candle flame.

There was a glass door and then

a stretch of tastefully modernistic lobby. There was a curved counter of bleached wood with letter racks in the wall behind it. Then there was a small, prim man across the counter, popping up from nowhere with the suddenness of a child's jack-in-the-box.

"Yes, sir?"

"Zelda Jardine. I...I'd like to see her."

"Who shall I say is calling?" The desk clerk's expression became a little more prim, as if he reserved the right to disapprove of Zelda Jardine's visitors.

"Shannon. She'll remember me."

SHE WOULD see him, Apt. 609.

An elevator took Shannon up. He pressed the button beside the door and took a deep breath and wiped his damp palm against the side of his trenchcoat. He heard light footsteps. The door opened as dramatically as a stage curtain swinging aside. Only he was the one on the stage, with the spotlight glaring down on him and his lines forgotten.

She wore a red hostess gown—and her blonde wig. She looked more than ever like an angel, and her smile was as good as a halo.

"This is quite a surprise."

Incredibly, she seemed glad to see him. Genuinely glad. She looked as if she had been waiting a long time for him and had finally given up hope and then he had appeared. Her voice lifted. Her vivid eyes shone.

It would be tough to disappoint her.

He said, "I thought I'd drop in for a minute or so. If you're too busy..."

That was it. That would give him an out, keep him from getting burned.

This was all a mistake. He shouldn't be here. He should be home, with his shoes off and his pipe going and the bottle of Old Forester within reach.

He should be where he could just think of the questions in his mind, not where the temptation to ask them would be too strong to resist.

Those wild, frightening, dangerous questions.

Beat it, Shannon. Scram while you have a chance. Tell her you suddenly remembered your wife and six kids. Tell her—

She had his bat and coat. She was saying something about not having expected to see him again. Then he was following her down a short hall and into a bright expanse of living room. She said something about drinks, and he heard a voice answer. It was hauntingly familiar, like the voices heard on warm summer nights.

He saw draw draperies in front of him and an oversize sofa flanked by tall table lamps. He sat down. He stood up again. He felt for his pipe, found it, then saw the cigarettes on the cocktail table at his feet. He lit a cigarette and stared for a moment at the lighter flame.

Burn, moth! Burn, foolish, blundering moth!

She was back. He took the cold glass she handed him and watched as she sat down on the sofa. Her eyes were grave, as if she had sensed his tension.

She said slowly, in the silence, "I hope that what happened hasn't been troubling you."

"I'm afraid it has," he said.

Her eyes widened a little. "Why...I'm sorry. If I had known—"

"Look." He put his glass on the cocktail table and dropped down beside her. He kneaded his hands together and watched them, as if their motions expressed what he wanted to say. "Look. It wasn't exactly what happened—I mean, not in general. It was one particular thing, a thing I

haven't been able to get out of my mind.

"I'm probably wrong—completely wrong. Maybe I'm crazy. I don't know. But I've got to find out. It means a lot to me. If I'm crazy—if I'm wrong—just tell me and I'll go. I won't bother you again."

She moved her golden head the faintest bit, her lower lip held between her teeth.

"It was your wig," he went on desperately. "I had to know why you wear a wig. I know about the show you're in. I saw it a few days ago. It's a swell show. But your wearing a wig—Look. Do you have to wear one all the time? I mean, maybe there's something wrong...."

"That's rather a delicate question, Mr. Shannon." She was looking down into her glass, avoiding him.

"I know," he muttered. "I know. It took me this long to get around to asking it. But it's important to me. Terribly important. Look, Miss Jardine. Let's try this another way. Do you ever have the feeling that you're...different? That you're lost, and there are things you want to know? That your whole life—"

She stood up. She half turned from him, silent and cold.

"All right," he said. "I'll go. I... I'm sorry."

He was starting past her when he felt her fingers on his arm. He stopped and stared at her for a strange, numb instant. Her eyes were swimming in wetness. Then she moved. Or it was he that moved. It was somehow inexplicable, somehow inevitable. There was motion and she was in his arms and time hung suspended in the chasm of eternity.

They were still standing, close together, when the telephone rang.

She whispered, "Wait. Whoever it is, I'll just say—" She hurried to a

desk across the room, lifted the receiver of the telephone that stood on it. "Yes?... No, I can't see him now. Tell him...tell him I'm not well."

A pause. Shannon could see her frowning. The man downstairs evidently was determined not to be put off.

"I just can't see him now!" she went on. "Some other time, please... Then tell him I don't want to see him. Not now—not even next year."

It didn't work. He could see that as she replaced the receiver and turned back to him.

"It was Les—Lester Brandt. He's coming up here." She darted forward. "He...he called me up that night. He seemed to know you."

"We work for the same engineering outfit," Shannon said. "Only he's the vicepresident."

She caught at his arms. "The bedroom. You can wait in the bedroom."

His face tightened. "Brandt hasn't got anything that makes me want to hide."

"I want it that way. I want you to wait."

"All right."

She swooped and was holding out his glass. "Take this with you."

Shannon was closing the bedroom door behind him when he heard the bell ring. The glass burned his hand. He wanted to throw it. He wanted to throw it fast and hard.

He stood beside the door and felt the slow, sullen heat of his face. Brandt again. Vice president. You couldn't miss it. Lester J. Brandt III took pains to see that you didn't miss it. Even after business hours.

Nobody missed it. Not even Zelda Jardine was immune.

He stood there and tried not to listen. He could hear them talking blurily beyond the door.

Keep out of it, Shannon. That part

of it doesn't interest you. All you want is information.

No—that wasn't all you wanted. You wanted Zelda Jardine, too. You wanted to eat your cake and have it. You had held her in your arms and it was something you would never forget. It was something you wanted never to be without.

But she didn't know anything. Or wouldn't tell. She hadn't committed herself. She might be different. And might not. But if she weren't, why had she stopped him? Why had she told him to wait?

It didn't make sense. Nothing made sense. But the tight, writhing, white-hot ball of anger inside him—he understood that.

Keep out of it, Shannon. Hold onto yourself, boy.

He looked at the glass in his hand. He lifted it abruptly and drained it. A drop of water on a forest fire.

There was a chest nearby. He placed the glass on it, walking softly. He wanted to keep walking. He wanted to do something—something violent. He had the sensation of being caged, held impotent.

The voices beyond the door. Don't listen.

But he was listening. The voices were suddenly louder. Then Zelda's rose sharply on a note of protest and pain.

That's for you, Shannon.

He had the bedroom door open in a flash and crossed the living room with long, hungry strides.

Brandt and Zelda stood near one end of the sofa. He was gripping her shoulders and had her bent partly back, shaking her a little, speaking swiftly and harshly. She was struggling to break free. Her gown had opened to her waist, and her hair shimmered like a golden stream with her writhing movements.

Brandt remained unaware of Shannon's presence until Shannon reached him and whirled him around. For an instant of stunned recognition, Brandt stared. Then Shannon's fist made a meaty sound against his face, and he staggered back against the sofa, fell sprawling to the cushions.

Go to it, Shannon. You've been wanting to do this for a long time. You have nothing to lose now. Your job is gone, finished, done with. You might as well forget you ever worked for Meyrick and Brandt.

The Brandt part was dazed, but not out. Shannon caught him by the coat front, pulled him forward, knocked him back again. He was reaching for the coat front once more when he felt Zelda's fingers on his arm.

"No!" she said. "Please. That's enough."

He looked at her through a clearing reddish haze. "The rat! Did he hurt you?"

"It's all right now. Let him be."

His eyes sharpened on Brandt. A thought that had been nagging at the back of his mind now shouldered its way forward into immediate consciousness.

Go ahead, Shannon. You'll never get another chance like this.

He bent over Brandt. The man was limp, unresisting, his eyes closed. He felt carefully along the hairline with his fingertips, then in sudden excitement was using his thumbnails to pry.

The thick, gently waving gray wig was held on by an adhesive undercoating. Shannon peeled it entirely away, stood looking at it with a numbing, incredulous feeling of triumph.

Brandt too? How many more were there?

And just what did this mean? There had to be a meaning, something tremendous, something awesome and important.

Zelda was watching him, silent and motionless, frozen, one hand at her throat.

What did she know? How did she fit in?

How do you fit in, Shannon?

Silence. A curious timelessness. The atmosphere of the room was unreal, nightmarishly crystalline. He and Zelda and Brandt were bugs embedded in transparent plastic, immobile, voiceless. They were motes held by a charged, straining tension.

His fingers moved over the wig. It felt odd somehow, different from his own. He realized then that the scalp had an extremely fine metal mesh worked into it. Fine wires ran from this, losing themselves indistinguishably amid the strands of gray hair.

The next step should be obvious, Shannon. Don't be modest. This is no time to be modest.

He reached up. He removed his wig. In its place he fitted the one he had taken from Brandt.

He stiffened. For as the wig molded to his skull, he heard—voices. Soundless voices. In his mind. They were almost like thoughts of his own, but thoughts he couldn't bring to focus, vague and fleeting.

"...to Washington yesterday...international situation...general rise in stocks..."

Then, very clearly: *"...are you in contact? I'm coming in..."*

That faded. The voices were vague and fleeting again.

"...more atomic laboratories...government control...in the hands of our group...have to end this interference..."

And then, suddenly sharp and strong: *"What's this? There's an outsider in the circuit somewhere!"*

He had a vivid impression of identity, one unfamiliar to him. He real-

ized his own identity had been sensed in a similar fashion and recognized as strange.

Outsider. That was himself. Shannon—outsider.

He hesitated, aware of danger, yet gripped by the fascination of what he was experiencing.

That other identity in the mental void was sending out an alarm, an almost purely emotional current that spread like ripples over a pool.

"Watch out, everyone! There's an outsider in the circuit! Be on guard!"

Other, muted voices rose in echo.

"...someone listening in...not of our group...must have gotten hold of a receiver..."

Suddenly, thunderously: *"Blank him out! Quick!"*

The threat was somehow unmistakable. It spoke of action, immediate and violent.

End of the line, Shannon. The party's over. And you'd better be damned fast.

He tore the wig off and threw it away from him. He watched it and felt the heavy, bellows-like rhythm of his heart.

Blank him out. In some way it had an overpowering significance. In some way it had a vital meaning for him.

In what way, Shannon? Do you really know? Or is your imagination just working overtime because of what happened?

No, there were memories. Deep down and far away, there were memories, meshing slowly and clumsily, like gears rusty from long disuse.

Blank him out. That was what had happened to him, of course. He knew that now. He had been blanked out. Something had been done to him—a sort of mental short-circuiting—and the knowledge of his existence up to a point two years ago had been almost completely erased.

He had been made to forget. He had forgotten why he was different, why he wore a wig. He had forgotten there were others like himself, had forgotten his relationships with them. There was a thoroughness about it, a magnitude, that chilled him to the last warm fibre of being.

So that's it, Shannon. You were blanked out. You know that much more. And now—

Now there was Zelda watching him, still motionless and frozen, her hand still at her throat. There was Brandt on the sofa, still limp and sprawled. And there was the gray wig on the floor—*burning*.

It had happened very suddenly. The flames had appeared like light at the pressing of a switch. And as he moved in almost instinctive response, he thought of the metal mesh worked into the wig, of the fine metal wires threading through the hair. Metal—and metal can be made very hot.

He kicked the wig over the rug. He kept kicking it until he found the bathroom, and there he watched the blaze burn itself out on the tiles. He felt a little sick. This blanking out process was a drastic thing, a frightening thing.

The gears meshed again. There was a kind of blast—a queer, *inward* blast—and then you felt the heat. You tore your wig away, and you watched it burn. And you wondered as you watched. You wondered a little as a child would wonder. Because you no longer remembered how or why or who. There were so many things you no longer remembered.

You were blanked out. You were excluded—marooned. But you still remembered certain fundamental things. You still went about the business of living and making a living. You still knew the motions. The only real difference was that certain doors had

been closed on you. You were locked out, left in the cold.

He found Zelda before him and felt her urgency in the grip of her hands. Her face was drawn and pale.

"We have to leave," she said. "We can't stay here now."

"But why?" he asked. "What is this all about?"

"Brandt's group will check their circuit. They'll find him missing, and they'll trace him here. They have ways of doing that." She shook him. "Quick! We have so little time."

He nodded and followed her as she hurried back into the living room. His understanding of the situation wasn't much clearer, but her very anxiety told him all he needed to know just then.

She gestured at Brandt, still limp and sprawled. "We'll take him with us. There's a fire escape at the end of the hall, and you can get him out of the building that way without being seen. I'll take his car keys, then get the car and pick you up."

"All right," he said. He felt an eagerness, a kind of vibrant rekindling, as if he had just started living again after a long interruption.

CARRYING Brandt's inert weight down the fire escape proved difficult, but he managed it without discovery. He lowered his burden to the ground with a sense of relief, and in the darkness of the alley settled down to wait. He wore his hat and trench-coat. Brandt's own hat had been jammed tightly on the man's head and the charred remains of the gray wig stuffed into one of his pockets as an afterthought by Zelda.

So far so good, Shannon. Or was it good? Was he doing what was right? He knew nothing of Zelda yet. He didn't know how she fitted in. He couldn't be certain that her interests

might not, in the long run, be opposed to his.

In spite of certain things that had happened, she could easily be—an enemy.

And Brandt? He didn't know how Brandt fitted in, either. Brandt belonged to a group of some sort, a group composed of persons who were different just as he and Zelda were different. A group possessing wigs—receivers—which made possible telepathic communication, and evidently even a kind of telepathic punishment. A group with what seemed awesome ramifications in every field of human affairs—in government, in the stock market, in atomic research.

Brandt could be a friend. He had, after all, been working for Brandt.

What was right and what was wrong? What could he believe?

Cut it out, Shannon. This is no time to come apart at the seams. You've got to see this business through. But be careful. Watch your step from here on in. Don't let red lips and soft arms fool you. Especially not a lovely hairless head.

Car lights swung into the mouth of the alley and swelled blindingly as they approached. His awareness of being hunted and fugitive made him press tensely against the building at his back until he was certain that Zelda was the driver of the car.

"Put him in back," she said. "Hurry!"

The car was large and sleekly luxurious. Thrusting Brandt onto the rear seat, Shannon climbed in beside the girl. She sent the car rolling smoothly toward the alley's opposite end.

She had dressed hastily, yet becomingly. She had changed her wig for one of a less conspicuous blonde shade and a shorter length. She looked still beautiful, still angelic.

He smelled the fragrance that

breathed from her and remembered having held her in his arms. And his doubt of her made him ache.

Careful, Shannon. You might get burned yet—more quickly and completely than you ever thought.

After a while she caught his glance and moved her head toward the back of the car. "How is he?" she asked.

"Still out," Shannon said. "I gave him another sock for good luck before I took him down the fire escape."

She shook her head a little. "We try not to hurt each other. Not too badly. Even when we have to. There are so few of us, you see."

"How many?" He held his breath, watching her. If she hesitated the slightest bit...

She didn't. At least, it wasn't discernible in the rapidly shifting light along the wide thoroughfare down which the car was moving.

"A little over four thousand, I believe. Originally, there were about two hundred of us. We stayed pretty close together at first. But in our different ways we had to make a living. Even here. We were superior in some respects, but not too superior. We had to avoid discovery, had to fit ourselves quietly into the scheme of things. We each had different talents, different training. And so we were forced to spread out. In time we spread... well, just about everywhere."

Her voice went on more softly, yet remained distinct over the throb of the car motor. "In the beginning, we were afraid of losing contact with ourselves, afraid of becoming lost. There were so many of the others, you see. We were drops of water in an ocean. But the receivers solved that problem—for a while, anyway. They could be disguised as wigs, and we had to wear wigs here, to start with.

"From the very first there were those among us who wanted to take over control of things here. Maybe they could have done it. We weren't exactly superior, of course, but we knew more in a lot of ways. The majority, though, was against taking over control. They argued that it wasn't ethical, that it just wasn't decent. We were guests here—uninvited guests, at that. But the point that won out was that we couldn't keep control in the long run. Once the others learned our tricks and organized against us, that would be the end of everything. We were different. That fact alone made us enemies.

"We—the majority of us, at least—wanted to be friends. And for the most part, we have been. We've done a lot of good. We've helped to make a lot of improvements, socially and scientifically. There are still wars, but war brings the greatest changes and advances, and brings them most swiftly. Not that we wanted it that way. There are too few of us to prevent it, and we don't have control. It's true that we've gradually arrived at a sort of indirect control. We simply knew more and couldn't have avoided it. But there are still too many factors beyond our ability to influence. We aren't gods. We've been reminded too often of that."

She spoke almost dreamily, her eyes fixed on the road ahead. He sat very still, afraid to move, afraid to break the spell. The interior of the car was filled with a soft dimness and a remote throbbing. They were on the outskirts of the city now, and the buildings were rapidly thinning out.

"We don't have full control," she went on, "but there are still those of us who want it. Like Les Brandt and his group. He already had control of his own particular field, just as the

members of his group had control over theirs. The rest might have been merely a matter of time, patience and careful planning. But there are still those of us who saw the dangers of control, and these formed a group opposed to Brandt's. There was even war of a sort between them. There was attack and counter-attack. But it was a strange war. The participants didn't want to hurt each other too much. Up to now, that is. Now there has been a change. Desperation did that, I think, awakening a kind of atavistic ruthlessness in a certain few. Brandt is one. A number of things have proved that to me.

"The first step in the change came when Brandt's group altered their receivers to operate on a different wavelength. That gave them secrecy. And they kept a constant guard, so that anyone else who entered their circuit would be instantly detected. They even developed a sort of mental static powerful enough to cause a curious amnesia in those they caught."

She glanced at Shannon. There was a sudden gentleness in her face, a sympathy. "Evidently you're one who was caught. I think you were working against Brandt and the others. It would have to be that way. And afterward they kept you to work for them. Our kind are always useful to each other. Or maybe Brandt didn't know about it, even after it happened. The techniques known now weren't developed all at once. And in wigs we look just like ordinary people. The amnesia—to call it that—wasn't actually incapacitating. You could go on quite as usual, without those around you being aware that anything had happened to you."

"I see..." Shannon said slowly. "But what about you? What is your place in all this?"

"I am—or was—a neutral, a member of a sort of third group, caught between the other two. We happen to be in positions where we couldn't do much either way. Some of us have lost contact completely and don't know what is going on. I met Brandt as a result of the show I'm in. The changes of wigs involved seems to have led him to me. He wanted me to come over on his side—in more ways than one. But I preferred to remain neutral, and he became very insistent, especially after he learned that you and I were acquainted."

Shannon recalled the interview in Brandt's office. He thought he understood now the motive for the other's sharp cross-examination.

Brandt knew you were different, Shannon. Brandt knew all along. If he had considered you an ordinary man, he wouldn't have been worried about your relationship to Zelda. And he wouldn't have been conciliatory.

He said to the girl, "There's one important thing you haven't explained yet. Who are we? What are we?"

She gave him an odd glance. She seemed abruptly sad, a little bitter, and yet quietly proud. "We are nothing more than we could possibly be—another race. Our forebears came from the stars. Originally, it seems, they were part of an expedition fleet. But something happened, and their ship became lost. They finally stumbled across this world. A well-advanced civilization already existed here, but fortunately the native race was physically very little different from our own. Any race developing under similar conditions was likely to resemble ours, you know, and those conditions have been repeated more than once in the vastness of the universe. Many of our people died during the landing, in a crash that destroyed the

ship. Only about two hundred were left. We—"

Her voice ended in a sharp intake of breath.

Shannon saw something move deliberately and swiftly behind the girl. An arm. Brandt's arm. The fingers were closed around a small, flat automatic pistol, and the muzzle was pressed to the back of Zelda's head.

The car swerved, straightened, slowed.

"Careful, Zell!" Brandt said in a thick, breathless voice. "You too, Shannon!"

A voice in a waking nightmare. Shannon listened to it with a numb, incredulous dismay. The thing couldn't be real. Brandt was unconscious, helpless. He couldn't be holding a gun. He couldn't—

Face it, Shannon. He's holding a gun, all right. And he's holding a gun because you didn't sock him hard enough, because you didn't search him carefully enough. You slipped up. Maybe it was just that you didn't do things like this every day. Maybe you didn't fully get the idea this was a game being played for keeps. But you slipped up. And now—

Face it, Shannon. You and Zelda are in trouble. Bad trouble.

"Turn off the road and stop," Brandt told Zelda. "Do just as I say. I'll shoot if I have to."

She swung the car into the soft earth at one side and braked it. All around them empty fields stretched away into the darkness. The nearest buildings were visible only as a cluster of distant lights, and other cars flashed by only at long intervals.

They were alone, Shannon knew. Alone and not likely to be disturbed.

That didn't improve the situation. Brandt's gun. He looked at it with a bleak yearning. If he could manage

to grab the gun. . . But no, he couldn't do that. Not while it was pressed to Zelda's head. Not while Brandt showed no reluctance about shooting.

"Now we can talk," Brandt said. He carefully sat back, his eyes quick and alert as they touched Shannon. "I made a mistake about you. The blank-out treatment is quite thorough as a rule, and I was certain you were harmless. But it seems you knew a lot more than you let on. And it seems you knew Zell a lot better than you told me you did. It also seems that you two were working against me."

The girl shook her head. "He learned I was wearing a wig the night I ran into him. This evening he came to see me about it. He thought I could explain certain things that had been bothering him. When you showed up I had him wait in the bedroom. I knew what your reaction to seeing him would be, and I wanted to avoid unpleasantness. Then you got rough, and he didn't know any better than to come to my help."

"But now he knows a lot better, eh?" Brandt asked ironically. "Especially after he investigated my receiver."

She shrugged. "He had figured out that much—or remembered that much. It couldn't have been helped."

"I have other ideas about that, Zell." Brandt was grimly emphatic. "As for you, it seems you aren't quite as neutral as you have insisted you were. There's something highly suspicious about you and Shannon spirit-ing me away like this. Just what did you intend doing with me?"

"Shannon was discovered using your receiver," she said wearily. "I knew you'd be traced to my apartment. I didn't want to get any more involved than I was already, so we left. I guess I had the idea that we could

drive to some quiet place and talk this over."

Brandt smiled thinly. "Smooth, Zell. Smooth and quick. But I'm very much afraid I can't take any chances with you. You've gone against me once too often. I and the others of my group are too close to success to risk any possibility of defeat at this stage. Before much longer we'll have the whole world in our pockets.

"So we can't gamble with unpredictable factors like you and Shannon, Zell. And we can't let our peculiar racial sentimentality stand in our way. There was a time when we avoided hurting each other beyond little things like the blank-out treatment. But that time has come to an end. Now we're fully prepared to take sterner measures."

Shannon said, "If you're talking about murder, Brandt, then don't forget you're still subject to the laws of this world, even if you are of another race. You can't hope to get away with murder."

"I'm relying on more than hope," Brandt returned calmly. "We have certain tricks that the people here know nothing about. Don't overlook that."

It could be gotten away with, Shannon admitted in despair. In one way or another. People who might be able to furnish evidence, for example, could be made to forget.

The end of living is this close, Shannon. The end of living when living had finally come to mean so much. Do something. Don't sit like a bump on a log. Do something heroic. It's expected in situations like this.

But he didn't feel heroic. He couldn't think of anything to do, short of jumping at Brandt's gun, and that was too far away and could go off much faster than he could hope to

move.

He could die a hero, anyway. He could do that much for Zelda.

Zelda...Zelda was touching her hair. It was as though her appearance were more important at the moment than the mere fact of dying. The fine-drawn stillness took on a sudden grotesque quality.

Brandt said in surprise, "That wig of yours, Zell. I've never seen it before." Then his voice slashed. "Take it off, Zell! Give it to me!"

"No. I—" She leaned away from him, her features mirroring swift alarm.

"Damn it, girl, if you've somehow—" Brandt lunged forward. His hand shot out, and then he had the wig.

"Careful!" he snapped at Shannon. "Don't make me kill you any sooner than I have to."

Shannon sighed and relaxed. Being a hero wasn't as easy as it was cracked up to be.

With the back of his hand, Brandt pushed his hat off. His other hand held the automatic with watchful steadiness.

He placed the underside of Zelda's wig against his naked head. His movements were cautious, alert.

In the very next instant he stiffened. He started to jerk the wig from his head. He froze. He was a statue, rigid and immobile. A statue with panic and horror finely chiseled into its face.

He didn't move when Shannon roughly swept the automatic out of his hand.

That bizarre interval finally ended. Brandt sagged backward. He gazed about him with a dawning wonder. He had forgotten his gun. His eyes

touched Shannon and the girl with no perceptible recognition.

Zelda sighed, a slow, deep sigh. "They were waiting for him," she said softly. "Everything was ready. All I had to do was draw his attention to the wig. Once he touched it, no matter how careful he tried to be, he was caught. They have tricks of their own, too—tricks that not even Brandt could have known anything about."

"They?" Shannon said. "Who do you mean, Zelda?"

"The other group. The group working against Brandt's group. They learned that I was acquainted with Brandt, you see, and they wanted me over on their side, too. They gave me the wig. But I wanted to remain neutral, in spite of everything." She shook her head and smiled slightly, a little sadly. "I found it couldn't be done. I had run into someone around a corner, and I couldn't be neutral any more."

He felt her hand touch his, and he tenderly closed his fingers over it. "Then what happened to Brandt. He's forgotten?"

"More than that. They got into his mind. They know the names of everyone in his group. So they'll forget, too. There won't be any control of the world. We can all be neutral now. We can all just think about being happy—and I think I'm going to be very happy."

"I think the same about myself," he said.

He drew her against him and knew he held the answer to every last question. He had reached the end of all his doubts and all his wondering. He was no longer lost, and no longer alone.



CHECKMATE to DEMOS

By H. B. Hickey

**Dave had to win the chess game—for
if he lost, the Earth would be destroyed . . .**

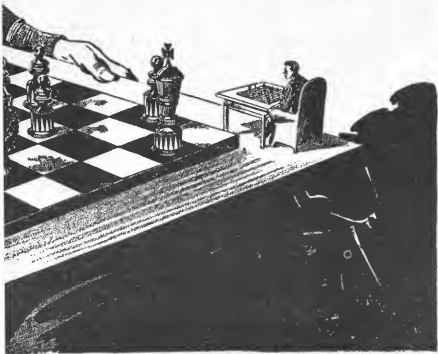
"YOUR move," said Entar, Gardook of Demos, a sly smile on his face.

Fenir, Gardook of Tamuz, stared balefully at the enormous checkerboard before him, then turned to Blatt in a silent plea for help. But the Gardook of Nisan had none to offer.

They sat thus, the three lords of the

three sister worlds, each intent on the two-foot squares of stone in the great gaming board. Two of Fenir's four hands toyed tentatively with a couple of pieces on the board while with his other hands he drummed a tattoo.

But no amount of thought was going to help Fenir. No matter which pieces he moved, or which way he moved



them, there were always Entar's pieces to sweep them from the board.

"All right," Fenir said at last. "I give up. You win."

He tossed across the board a necklace that had the radiance of a dozen suns. When the Gardooks played they played for stakes that were worthy of the lords of planets. And when a Gardook lost he paid gracefully.

Fenir shoved his chair away from the board and rose and stretched himself to his full height, which was slightly more than eighteen feet. His great mouth opened in a yawn that would have seemed vulgar in a commoner.

"Tired?" Entar asked. He carelessly stuffed the necklace in his pocket.

"Fenir is always tired when he loses at kven," Blatt grinned.

"True," Entar said. "But I thought you'd both stay for some dvina after the game."

At mention of the royal vintage of Demos, Fenir's eyes brightened momentarily. It seemed that he might succumb to the lure. But then he shook his head and stifled another yawn.

"No, I'd better not. Really. You know, it's not all kven and dvina being a Gardook. There are problems of state to face every day, and that takes a clear head. Believe me."

Entar and Blatt broke into good-natured peals of laughter.

"And he always pleads affairs of state when he loses at kven," Blatt said. "Tell the truth, Fenir, and admit you're a bad loser."

"Not at all," Fenir said, knowing he was pinned down.

He made a grand gesture. "But after all, you can't expect me to keep my interest awake with the sort of stakes we play for."

"What?" Entar gasped. "Did I hear you right?"

"Certainly." It was said with all the

dignity Fenir could muster.

Entar and Blatt were staring at him with mouths agape. Then slowly, a joyous smile spread across Entar's face. All four of his hands beckoned to Fenir.

"Well," Entar said. "Well! Now you're talking my language. When it comes to a sporting proposition the Gardook of Demos takes a back seat to no one. Name your stakes and let's get at it."

"Oh, you know he was just talking," Blatt said.

IF THERE had been a chance that Fenir would back down, Blatt had ended it. Fenir glared at him, then plumped down into his chair and pulled it up to the board.

"For a man who never gambles, you do a lot of talking yourself," he said sourly.

"Come, come," Entar said. He was already arranging his pieces, his four hands darting swiftly about the board.

"Tell you what," he suggested. "I'll give you three marbas handicap and play you for Tamuz."

"Hold on," Blatt interrupted. He knew what a foolish wager could lead to. "Besides, the law prohibits that. A Gardook can't give up his realm."

"Always the spoil-sport," Entar grunted. The Gardook of Demos had a cruel streak in his nature and he sometimes disliked this Blatt, with his kind and thoughtful ways.

"Think of something big," Entar urged Fenir. "Anything. I'll snap it up so fast it'll take your breath away."

Fenir was stumped. He had put himself in a bad spot and he didn't like it at all. He could not think of anything of unusual value he cared to risk against Entar, who was considered the greatest kven player of the three planets. Fenir searched for a way out.

"Something of tremendous value," he

mused, as though to himself. "But something not prohibited by law. I really can't think of a thing."

"Well, I can," Entar said. "It fits this delicate case as though made for it. Your astronomers discovered a likely looking little planet the other day, didn't they?"

"So?"

"I hear it's rich in radioactive minerals. That makes it very valuable. But I'm sure you haven't yet claimed ownership of it for Tamuz. And that means it isn't yet part of your realm. So you can gamble it away without breaking the law. Right?"

"I guess so," Fenir muttered. Then he brightened. "But I can't think of anything you own that's of equal value."

"You underestimate me. If you win you get my own secret formula for dvina, plus the services of my own head brewer for a period of five years!"

Fenir's mouth dropped, and even Blatt was aghast. They knew that Entar would rather lose two or his arms than the sole ownership of that precious dvina of Demos which was his pride and joy.

"That certainly is sporting," Blatt said. "If not for my vow I'd be tempted to risk something of my own for a share of that formula."

Now Fenir's eyes glittered. This was worth shooting for. He swept three of Entar's marbas from the board and hunched forward. "My move first?" he asked, eager for every advantage.

"You move first," Entar said magnanimously.

After due deliberation Fenir pushed a marba forward two squares. Entar countered with a like move. Fenir advanced another marba, playing it safe.

Now Entar showed why he was acknowledged a true master of kven. Lacking three of his first line pieces, he

could not afford to play safe and trade one for one. He began to bring up his big pieces for slashing attack.

"Teva to Gardook's Blen three." He moved the heavy piece one square forward and one sideways.

Fenir, still playing it safe, advanced another marba. Entar slid a Blen, a tall, graceful piece, in a slashing move across the board.

DESPERATELY Fenir tried to form his more numerous pieces into a solid wall of defense. But Entar gave him no chance. By the sixth move Entar was brilliantly shifting a Blen to his Teva five. Fenir was forced to bring his second piece out of the back line. His Gardoona, with her black crest, went up to the space his Blen had vacated. Entar moved a marba and Fenir took it with a Teva.

"Blen to Gardook's Teva five!" Entar chortled. Blatt said, "Brilliant!"

From there on it became a rout. Fenir was allowed to have the momentary pleasure of taking a big piece with a marba, and then found that Entar had by his sacrifice bottled up Blena and Gardoona. In order to protect his Gardook Fenir had to give up both Tevas. But Entar was already after the Gardoona.

"Blen to Gardoona three," Fenir said.

"Teva to Blen six!"

Now both Gardook and Gardoona were under direct attack. Fenir searched wildly for a way to create an impasse which would end the game with a tie. He was too late. With a growl he swept his remaining pieces off the board, admitting defeat.

"All right," he said. "The new planet is yours."

Entar made him a mock bow of thanks.

"What do you intend to do with it now that you've won it from Fenir?"

Blatt asked the Gardook of Demos.

"The usual thing, I suppose. First have it ray-blasted thoroughly as a sanitary measure, and then send in robot crews to work the radioactive lodes."

He frowned at Blatt, whose forehead was furrowed. "What the deuce are you pondering now?"

"Well, I admit the necessity of ray-blasting for reasons of sanitation. But what if the place is inhabited?"

"Inhabited? Certainly it's inhabited. With vermin and disease carrying beasts, like every other place we've ever taken over!"

"You know what I mean," Blatt said. "What if there are beings there who are intelligent? Like us. The first blast would wipe them out. That would be murder!"

"What a philosopher," Fenir groaned. "He thinks of things that have never in history come up, and are not likely to arise now."

"Nevertheless," Blatt persisted, "according to our laws about the killing of sentient beings . . ."

"The odds against it are a sextillion to one," Entar said.

"Even so . . . The possibility exists, however remote."

"All right! All right!" Entar thundered. "In deference to our friend's conscience I will first have the planet scouted. And I will order it done at once. Satisfactory?"

"Perfectly," Blatt smiled. "Now how about some of that dvina?"

DAVE HARKNESS looked down a long line of empty tables and chairs and then scowled at his opponent. They were going to be the last to finish. Binky would be on needles and pins by now, and Ellen would be raging because her evening paper was late.

If not for the fact that it was a breach

of etiquette, Dave would have asked his opponent why the devil he didn't move. Couldn't he see that he'd lost? But at last his opponent was coming out of his reverie. His lips moved as he shifted a piece.

"King to Bishop one."

"Rook to Queen two," Dave said, and suited the action to the word.

The other man spread his hands in defeat.

"I resign. Good game, Mr. Harkness."

Dave didn't even take the time to thank him. Before he could leave the tournament hall he had to get a complete record of every game that had been played that night. Then he had to find out who his next opponent would be.

Only when all those things had been done did he start home. On the way he stopped for a sandwich and a cup of coffee. At a convenient newsstand he picked up Ellen's paper.

He had been right about Ellen. After hanging up his hat and coat, Dave took the paper into the living room. Ellen glowered at him.

"About time!" She let him give her a peck on the cheek and then opened the paper to her favorite comics.

"Your lord and master is waiting for you," she said over the rustle of the pages.

Her remark had been unnecessary. Already Binky's strident voice was calling down the stair well. "Dave!"

Dave ran for the stairs and took them two at a time up to the floor above. If he didn't hurry Binky would have another attack. And that meant more doctors and more bills. Then Dave was at the bedroom door and stepping inside. He caught sight of Binky. As always, at that first glimpse, Dave sucked in a quick, shallow breath.

That thing on the bed, that thing that

had once been a man, that grotesquery without arms or legs, that gargoyle face; that was Dave Harkness's handiwork!

Once Dave had been a happily married man, possessed of a pretty wife and a good job and many friends. And then, on a clear dry summer night, it had happened.

There had been dancing and laughter and a good many drinks. Afterward there was the urge to go for a drive, and the feeling of power that came when his foot went all the way down on the accelerator and the big car hurtled along the road. And then the panic that swept over him when he saw the other automobile pull out of the side road and knew that he could not stop in time.

Out of the wreckage of the other car they had dragged a thing that a few minutes before had been a human being. That life still lingered in the crushed and mangled fragment of a man was a miracle.

The doctors said there was no hope. They were wrong. With unbelievable tenacity that pitiful creature had clung to life, and willed himself to live, and *had* lived. That was Binky.

It could have meant the end of Dave's hopes for a future. It might even have meant prison for him. He was willing to accept those. But his insurance company had something to say about it. They refused to pay Binky's claim. Somehow, they discovered that his car had been on the wrong side of the road.

Dave had felt a moment of relief. Then he had gone to the hospital to see Binky, and he had found that he could not bring himself to tell him. Instead, Dave had offered to take Binky into his home, to care for him as long as he lived. It seemed little enough to do for this man from whom he had taken arms

and legs, to whom he had left only a mind and a will to live.

ELLEN had unwillingly accepted the situation. For a long time she and Dave were nurse and servant to Binky. They installed him in the master bedroom. They did everything in their power to make him comfortable. They became his hands and feet. Binky was a tyrant and they were his slaves. But that was not enough for Binky. One night he had called Dave.

"Sit down, Harkness. Here, on the bed, next to me." Binky's voice was shrill and his black eyes followed Dave's every movement.

"You know, Harkness," he continued, "I almost feel sorry for you. Does that surprise you? You took away my limbs; in place of them you've practically given me your own. You would gladly change places with me if you could."

"Gladly," Dave said softly.

"Yes. But there was one thing I valued more than life itself. I had a dream, Harkness. And just as you must perform the acts of my own limbs, Harkness, just so will you fulfill my dream for me."

"I don't . . ." Dave began. Binky stopped him with a curse.

"Listen. I'm going to tell you about my dream, about the one thing that occupied my thoughts always, about the dearest thing you took from me:

"I was going to become the greatest chess player in the world! Not just *one* of the greatest, Harkness, but the very best of them all. And I would have done it. All my life I have practiced and studied.

"Do you know what I do when you and your precious wife are not around? I close my eyes and play chess with myself! I pretend I am playing the great masters. And I defeat them just

as surely as if I were playing them in reality. No man lives who knows more about chess than I do. No man lives who has my *mind*.

"But I will never be able to play a real match! You can't realize what that thought did to me, how it ate into me like acid, just as the acid from my car battery ate into my face. To think that I could never play a match, never enter a tournament.

"And then I thought of you, Harkness. Through you I'm going to make my dream come true."

"But I don't even know how to play," Dave protested.

"You'll learn. When you turn on the light you'll see cases of books that came today. They're chess books. And there's a board."

"But suppose I have no knack for the game? I may never be as good as you."

"I don't expect you to. It's impossible. But you don't have to be that good. That's where my plan comes in. When you have a great mind like mine you can solve any problem."

And he really *had* solved it, Dave thought now as he let out his breath and stepped into the room. The solution had seemed as impossible as Binky's dream, but it had worked. If I told the tournament officials, Dave thought, they wouldn't believe me.

"He played even slower than I said he would," was Binky's greeting. "But you won."

"Yes, I won."

"In twenty-three moves?"

"In precisely twenty-three moves, each one of them exactly as you planned it."

DAVE'S voice was dull. For two years now there had always been the same questions and answers. One year Binky had spent teaching him the fundamentals of chess. It had

turned out that Dave had little talent for the game; but under Binky's tutelage he had become a better than average player. Then Binky had made him join a chess club.

During the next two years Dave had played several games each evening at the club, and each evening he had brought home a record of the games for Binky to analyze. Dave had begun to win his games; when the sectional eliminations for the national tournament began, he had been chosen to represent the club.

"Let's have those scores," Binky said. "Who's your opponent for tomorrow?"

"Fellow names Lensinger," Dave said. He sorted out the transcript of Lensinger's game of that evening and held it up so Binky could read it.

"What a fool the man is," Binky grated. "Second only to the man he beat. Listen to this, starting at move twenty: Bishop to Knight three, Queen to Pawn, King to Queen two, Pawn to King's Rook five."

"What about it?" Dave asked.

"Good grief, Harkness, that's exactly the game Philidor and Captain Smith played in London in March, 1790! And Lensinger's opponent let himself be taken just as Smith did. You can look it up."

Dave didn't bother to look it up. He knew Binky would not be wrong. His mind was truly phenomenal; he could recall instantly any game he had ever seen or read. And he had read, or made Dave read to him, every important game to date.

"There's only one man in this sectional worth playing," Binky said. "That's Morton. Three years ago he beat Mike Finn, the Irish master, and he once played Sazonoff to a draw. But let's get on to Lensinger. Take this down."

For an hour his voice droned on. If Lensinger had White, Dave was to play a Sicilian Defense. If Dave moved first he was to play a King's Bishop opening. In either case Binky could plot out Lensinger's probable line of play.

"This fellow has no initiative. It will be straight stuff. I've given you the line of attack. On the seventeenth move you'll take his Bishop with your Queen and he'll find he's bottled up his own Queen with his pawns. On the nineteenth move he'll resign."

For a moment Binky's eyes lost their brightness and he sighed heavily. Dave put a water glass to his mouth and he took a few sips.

"All right. Now let's take the other games tonight."

Dave took up the sheaf of scores and began to read rapidly; names of players and progressions of games came in a swift stream of words. But fast as he read he knew that Binky's mind was recording every syllable.

"That's all," Dave said at last. "Got it?"

"Of course. God! Everybody calls himself a chess player! Take that fellow Granz, the third game you read. You'll probably play him. He considers himself a follower of Capablanca, but he's picked up only Capablanca's weaknesses."

Dave shrugged and got up to leave. He knew Granz and knew that to everyone but Binky the man would have been a fine player. Yet, when the time came, Binky's genius acting through Dave would crush Granz. And Morton would go down to defeat too. There was no doubt left in Dave's mind that Binky would realize his dream.

"Better go now," Binky said. "My heart is starting to act up."

Dave wondered how bad Binky's heart really was. Ellen said Binky was faking, but then she hated him.

Now Binky would go to sleep, probably to dream of future games. But for Dave there would be no sleep for hours. He had to stay awake until he had memorized the next night's play, as planned by the monster he himself had created.

ENTAR was in a jovial mood.

"So you finally got here," he said as Blatt entered the room. Behind Blatt came Fenir, and Entar's smile grew more expansive.

"Fenir too! Excellent. I was afraid you wouldn't be able to come."

"What's the occasion?" Fenir asked.

"That's what I'd like to know," Blatt grumbled. "Entar's message brought me away from an interesting experiment."

"Don't worry," Entar grinned. "This will keep you interested enough. My scouting expedition to that new planet I won has just returned. And since Blatt was the cause of the expedition I wanted him to hear the report. You too, Fenir. You'll get a chuckle out of hearing about Blatt's intelligent beings."

The Gardook of Demos clapped his hands twice and an instant later a young man in the uniform of the Gardook's personal staff entered the room.

"I've read this, of course," Entar said in an aside. "But I don't mind hearing it again. Go ahead, Kresan."

The young man drew from a case he carried a sheaf of reports and began to read:

"Our party, consisting of twelve ships and a thousand men, left Demos on the nineteenth day of Ooyar, our destination the new planet X. We reached our goal on the sixtieth day of the same period and hovered in space for preliminary survey.

"The planet, as reported, is comparatively minute. Intense radioactivity

was noticed, apparently a result of some sort of eruptions. Noting nothing untoward, we ventured closer and effected a landing on the sixty-first day.

"Our first landing was made on a body of liquid, thickly stocked with low forms of marine life. Proceeding from that point, we cruised to land and came down under cover of darkness, as our instruments showed activity below. Our choice of site was fortunate, as it turned out that we had landed near a large center of population."

Kresan paused for breath and Entar said, "Now the fun starts. Continue."

"The planet is infested with vermin of all types, most of them disease carriers. There is also a variety of four footed creatures. However, the dominant species resembles ourselves somewhat, walking erect on two legs; but due to various ray bombardments have developed only two arms and hands, and being also of puny size.

"In the opinion of our scientists it is this lack of auxiliary arms which has hindered the development of the species and caused it to remain at a low level.

"Our first task was to scale ourselves down to size. This we did, having brought equipment to meet all contingencies. Then we ventured abroad.

"The planet is called Earth by its inhabitants. It is divided into a great number of separate principalities, each of which seems to be constantly at war with its neighbors. We had landed in one of the largest of these principalities. We found there a representative collection of the different races of Earth, but they are hardly distinguishable except by color and body configuration.

"However, such minor differences are given what seems undue importance to an impartial observer.

"THE inhabitants, in great part, live tightly packed into cities. Since

transportation is exceedingly primitive the cities are filled with noxious vapors given off by vehicles. A particular sort of vehicle is so worshipped by the populace that its sale and use is uncontrolled, although hundreds of thousands are killed and mangled yearly beneath its wheels. Disease is rampant, filth is found everywhere. The inhabitants exist by means of robbery, the victims being each other. The chief robbers are acclaimed and honored.

"Several principalities, it is true, among them the one in which we landed, have made persistent attempts to control the aggressive and destructive tendencies of individual persons. Little success is apparent.

"Freedom is everywhere worshipped as a god, and nowhere to be found. True distinction is greeted with ridicule, its possessor often destroyed. All manner of strange religions and rites exist; inanimate objects and long dead beings are invested with boliness."

"Enough!" Blatt cried. "This is the worst yet."

"Unbelievable," Fenir said. "Our prehistoric ancestors were far advanced over these creatures."

"Wait. You haven't heard the worst," Entar told them. "Read on, Kresan."

"Poverty is more than common; in fact, for the great majority of Earth's inhabitants, starvation is the greatest hazard to be avoided. Cooperation between men and nations is given lip service; institutions for its achievement are established, and then studiously disregarded.

"Although these creatures pride themselves on what they call science, they have not yet attained the faintest glimmer of understanding of the universe. They have succeeded in prolonging the lives of many, only to feed those saved into the maws of war, thereby

destroying the distinction between fortunate and unfortunate.

"Of self-knowledge and truth they have none. They lie habitually, being unable to admit truth even to themselves, and they know not why.

"With an intuitive realization of their inevitable doom, many render their lot bearable by the consumption of drugs which produce insensibility. In passing, it may be remarked that it is often impossible to distinguish the latter from many of their fellows who do not resort to such drugs.

"The radioactivity which brought the planet to our attention was caused by a series of atomic explosions, produced by the victors in a war just ended. Not content with this horror, these creatures plan fresh wars in which more destructive weapons will be utilized. A further extension of bestiality will be the use made in the next conflict of intentionally spread diseases.

"In closing, and fearful lest this report seem exaggerated, the commander of this expedition reports that millions of these Earthlings find recreation in the witnessing of exhibitions in which men batter each other mercilessly."

KRESAN'S voice stopped, and for a moment there was silence. The grin had faded from Entar's face. He looked grim. Fenir and Blatt were aghast.

"Good grief," Fenir said at last. "Can such things be?"

"I saw it with my own eyes," Kresan assured him.

"Well?" Entar asked Blatt. Entar's grin had returned, a bit malicious now. "What do you think? Are these creatures civilized? Or sentient beings? Those were your expressions, I believe."

"Incredible," Blatt said. "Not even the blue men of Krinza sank so low."

"That's all I wanted to hear," Entar

said. "I'll order the ray-blasting to begin at once. Or do you have more misguided sympathy? Or more philosophy for us?"

A slow flush mounted to Blatt's cheeks.

"Since you bring it up, yes."

"Come now," Fenir snorted. "You're just being difficult."

"Let him rave," Entar said. He was laughing. "This gets funnier right along."

"Perhaps," Blatt said. "But the point I wish to make is a fine one, and therefore one which you especially, Entar, should appreciate."

Blatt's compliment was acknowledged with a mock bow and he went on.

"It is true that we have never before encountered such bestiality and malignance. Nothing even approaching it, in fact. Yet it is in that very circumstance that I find hope!

"The excesses of other worlds have been limited in comparison with Earth's. But limited by what? By a lack of intelligence. After all, it does take some intelligence to conceive such horrors as disease warfare. And where there is a ray of intelligence there is hope."

"You're impossible, Blatt!" Fenir said. "There's a good chance they'll blow their solar system apart with their atomic toys."

"They probably will," Blatt admitted. "It is almost a certainty they will. But as long as some intelligence exists, they have a chance to save themselves."

"I deny such intelligence exists on the planet Earth," Entar said. "And if they want to save themselves they'd better do it soon. My fleet is in readiness to leave right now."

"To kill a child is as much murder as to kill a man," Blatt warned. "By the same token, if you destroy the germ of sentience it is as though you had de-

stroyed it full grown."

"I found no such germ in Kresan's report. Did you, Fenir?"

"Not I."

"Then it's two against one," Entar said. "Order the fleet to leave, Kresan."

"One moment, please," Blatt begged. He turned to Kresan.

"Perhaps there was something you did not report, something which may have seemed unimportant."

"There was one interesting thing," Kresan admitted. "They play a game which is much like kven. But with their usual belligerence. Their finest players often seek unfair advantage, and many of them cultivate unpleasant mannerisms designed to upset their opponents."

"Aha!" Blatt shouted. "I thought there would be something. And you, of all people, Entar, must admit that kven is a game requiring intelligence."

"It's probably not at all like kven," Entar said angrily.

"They are played much the same," Kresan informed him. "I have with me the score of a game played between two experts."

HE BROUGHT out a sheet of paper and laid it on the table. The three Gardooks gathered about it while Kresan explained.

"What we call a Gardook is there called a King. A Gardook is a Queen, a Teva a Knight, a Blen a Bishop, and a Marba a Pawn. The game is called Chess."

"Well?" It was Blatt's turn to crow.

"It means nothing," Entar retorted. "Look at this score. Experts, mind you! Any child of Demos could defeat them in ten moves."

The Gardook of Demos knew the weakness of his argument. He was more than a little angry. Blatt had put

him to a great deal of expense already. And there was a good chance the planet might not repay him.

"In five moves," Blatt was saying. "But this may not represent the best play of Earth."

Entar's eyes narrowed. He was quick to note that Blatt had slipped up by venturing into conjecture. Perhaps, the Gardook of Demos thought, he might take advantage of the slip and come out with a profit. It would be a good joke.

"So now they are masters of kven," Entar snorted. "Next thing you'll be saying one of these Earthlings might beat me!"

"Anything is possible," Blatt said.

"Care to bet on that?"

"You know I don't bet."

"In other words, you're not prepared to back up your beliefs. Kresan, you may as well get started."

"Hold on," Blatt said. "This is all fun to you. But it's serious business with me. So serious that I'm willing to break my vow."

Entar was instantly contrite. Basically he was a good hearted man.

"No," he said. "I wouldn't want you to do that. But since you are my friend, and this means so much to you, I am going to make you a proposition."

"What is it?"

"I am going to Earth with my fleet. And when I get there I am going to search out the greatest player on the planet and have a game with him. If I beat him we ray-blast the planet. If he beats me I turn around and come home and forget we ever discovered the place."

"That's not an even gamble," Blatt protested.

"Best I can do. But I'll be kind. When we blast them we'll do it from all sides at once. They'll never know what hit them."

WARM weather was hard on Binky.

His breathing, beneath the thin sheet which covered him, was shallow and labored. Yet his eyes remained bright as ever.

"This is it, Harkness," he said softly.

"This is it," Dave agreed. "Too bad it has to be Resnevsky I play for the championship."

His last word produced a change in Binky. Eyelids puffy and dark from lack of sleep came down over the dark eyes. Binky's breathing seemed to stop; and for a moment Dave thought he was dead. Then the eyes opened.

"The *championship*," Binky whispered dreamily. "And against Resnevsky! I'm glad it's Resnevsky. To win from anyone but the best would be a hollow victory."

"I think I understand," Dave said.

"Yes, I think you do. You've worked hard for this, harder than you would ever work for yourself."

"After all . . ."

"No. I know what you were about to say. But your attitude isn't that of a man unwillingly paying a debt. You've put your whole heart in this, just to give me what I want. How easy it would have been for you to make just one slip! And there would have been an end to your drudgery, your slavery. No more games to memorize, no more to play.

"But you're not that kind, Harkness. You wouldn't even think of cheating. You're a fine man, a *good* man."

The effort of speaking had tired Binky. For a moment he was silent. Then he smiled wanly.

"Too good a man to hate, Harkness. I stopped hating you a long time ago. I want you to know that, before you leave tonight." He stirred slightly. "Well, this is the last. After tonight you'll be your own man again."

"What if I lose?"

Binky smiled at that. His eyes lifted to the clock Dave had put on the wall beyond the foot of Binky's bed.

"You won't lose. When that clock strikes midnight you will have made your thirtieth move. The game will be over; your debt to me will be paid in full."

It turned out that Dave's wife had been thinking the same thing. When he came downstairs she was waiting for him. Dave saw that she had been drinking. She often did that now.

"Binky's Little Robot!" Ellen laughed. Lately she had taken to calling Dave that. "If it isn't the Zombie of Chess, all set to go out and win the championship!"

Then she was suddenly serious and her hand was on Dave's sleeve.

"You've *got* to win, Dave. It means our freedom."

Very gently he removed her hand.

"Not for me, Ellen. Maybe for you it's right to feel that way. But not for me. As long as Binky lives I'm going to take care of him."

TONIGHT Dave Harkness was news. There were reporters and photographers, and flashlights kept going off in his face. By his nerveless, logical play he had become classified as a cold fish, a perfect foil for Resnevsky's brilliance.

Dave wondered what they would say if he told them why he could play so swiftly, so emotionlessly, without apparent thought.

Resnevsky was already on the dais, beneath the electric board which would flash every move they made to the audience. He was chewing on the stub of a cigar, rocking back and forth on his heels. Championship play was no novelty for him. He saw Dave coming and smiled and put out his hand.

"Quite a crowd," Resnevsky said

pleasantly. "Let's give them a good show."

Then they were sitting down and Resnevsky's face was tight and composed, the cigar jutting out of the corner of his mouth. His eyes were narrowed to slits.

Dave drew White and the match was on.

As Binky had predicted it was Queen's Gambit, declined, precisely the game which Resnevsky preferred. Dave's opening was intentionally aggressive, leaving Resnevsky an apparent play for the isolation of Dave's Queen's pawn.

But Resnevsky was no man to underestimate an opponent. He choose to ignore the opening in favor of a development of his middle. When his attack came the way had been carefully prepared. His caution was suddenly gone.

Queen to Bishop five, the electric board flashed.

There was a gasp from the audience. The move had come out of a clear sky. They waited tensely, expecting to see Dave show signs of panic.

They were disappointed. His counter move was made swiftly, without hesitation. Binky had expected Resnevsky to bring his Queen down and had made provisions for it.

Within two moves Resnevsky had withdrawn his Queen. What had seemed an impregnable position was being assailed from all sides. Resnevsky slowed down, as Binky had said he would.

Dave had time now to look over the audience. From this point on the game would proceed according to blueprint. Resnevsky would find what looked like a certain winning combination. By the time he discovered his mistake it would be too late.

But the audience couldn't know that. They were all sitting erect, their attention fixed on Resnevsky and the board.

They were all waiting eagerly for one of his famous flashes of brilliance.

Not quite all of them, Dave saw. His eyes were drawn to a man he had seen the night before. It would have been difficult to avoid noticing this spectator. Despite the warmth of the evening he wore an overcoat buttoned up.

Probably a chess fanatic who had pawned his only suit so that he could buy a ticket to the championship match. There were plenty like that. Yet this spectator was too relaxed to be one of them. He seemed not to care whether it was Dave or Resnevsky who won.

Resnevsky had found his combination by now and Dave had to turn back to the board. Looking at it, he almost doubted Binky for a moment. Resnevsky's black pieces were solid, his own white ones spread widely.

It was almost impossible to believe that in another ten moves the game would be over. Resnevsky certainly did not believe that. He was smiling.

Then Dave's Knight began its relentless advance across the board and Resnevsky lost his smile. Step by step he was driven back. It was too late for brilliance now. Every move he made was putting him deeper into the hole.

He was so completely bewildered that Dave felt sorry for him. Resnevsky was actually talking to himself!

"How did this happen to me?" Dave heard him mutter.

The cigar was tilted downward as Resnevsky studied the board. So far the audience did not realize that the match was over. But Resnevsky realized it, even before Binky had said he would. Dave looked at his watch: eleven-thirty, the twenty-ninth move. Then Resnevsky was smiling up at Dave, a trifle sadly, a little bitterly.

"My congratulations, Mr. Harkness. Some time you must tell me how you did it."

SOME time, Dave thought, he would tell them all. Some time the name of Dave Harkness would be erased from the record books, and Binky would have what was rightfully his. Binky didn't want it that way; not yet, he had said.

There were more pictures and a good deal of polite cheering, and then a good deal of handshaking. And then the hall began to clear and the lights were dimmed and Dave was free to go.

It was just outside the door that he found himself next to the man in the overcoat.

"He could have beaten you, you know," the man in the overcoat said.

His voice was strangely metallic, and a little hollow, like a phonograph record. Dave stared at him blankly and paused, and in that interval they fell behind the last remnants of the crowd.

"But of course," the strange man continued. "Even after the twenty-sixth move; in any one of twelve different ways."

His first guess had been right, Dave thought. The man was a chess fanatic, the kind who could figure out any problem—after the game was over.

"You're probably right," was what Dave said. "I wish I had the time to discuss it with you. But I haven't."

He tried to move ahead and the other stepped directly in front of him. For an instant Dave was angry, and he had an impulse to shove the fellow aside.

Instead, he said, "Look, now, why don't you move along?"

And suddenly they were not alone. There were now six or seven men who had seemingly materialized out of thin air, all of them ridiculously buttoned up in heavy coats. There was also a limousine drawn up at the curb, with another coated figure at the wheel.

"What kind of crazy joke is this?" Dave demanded. Inside, he was a little

frightened. None of these men were smiling.

"There is nothing to be afraid of," the first one said. "I merely wish to play a game of chess with you."

The door of the limousine was open now and they were moving toward it. Dave looked around wildly for a policeman.

"Hey," he said, "you can't get away with . . ."

But they *were* getting away with it. He was inside the big car and they were all around him and the car was moving smoothly off. And as they turned the corner there was a policeman. When he saw the size of the car the policeman tipped his hat.

Then they were off the narrow streets and onto a main artery and rushing toward the edge of the city. Dave made one desperate lunge for the door and was caught short. Gently but firmly he was pushed back into the seat.

"That was foolish," said the leader of the group. "You might have injured yourself. And really, I just want to play a single game with you."

Suddenly Dave had it. This fellow was a fanatic, all right. But a rich one; rich enough to arrange a kidnaping merely for the pleasure of playing a game with the champion. But why the overcoats?

He found he had spoken the question aloud.

"It is uncomfortable," the leader admitted. "And I felt frightfully conspicuous. But I suppose I should have been even more conspicuous without it."

He was unbuttoning the heavy coat and shrugging out of it. And then Dave saw that he had four arms.

JUST how big the thing was, Dave could not tell. It seemed to be round and as tall as a three story build-

ing and it filled all of the great clearing in the woods near the city. And yet, strangely enough, he could not see it.

What he really saw, Dave realized, was a sort of black hole in the bright moonlight which illuminated everything else in the countryside. Whatever this thing was, it had the quality of absorbing light.

For a while the car had coasted along without lights, and with nobody speaking. Now they had stopped before this thing and everyone was getting out. Dave found he was in the center of the group. They stepped into the blackness and through what must have been a door, because suddenly the blackness was gone.

Light came from nowhere, yet was everywhere, illuminating immense curving walls of some strange metal. Yet this space they were in constituted only a part of the whole, for there were doors leading to other parts of the place.

There was an instrument panel on one wall. There was also a goodly amount of furniture, but of gigantic proportions.

"Look here—" Dave began. His captor cut him short.

"Just one moment, Mr. Harkness, if you will. Kresan and his men don't seem to mind, but I find my present scale confining."

He and the rest went out through a door, leaving Dave alone. After a few minutes there was a high pitched humming that faded quickly.

The thought of escape entered Dave's mind, but before he could get fairly started he heard them coming back and returned to the position where they had left him. Then the door was opening and they were back in the room. Dave's eye popped; he was thankful he had not run.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you," the leader said. "I hope our present size doesn't

frighten you."

It was hard to believe. But there could be no doubt about it. That face, now grown so enormous, was the same one which had confronted Dave outside the tourney hall. The gigantic furniture in this room made sense now.

"Allow me to introduce myself," the leader was saying. "I am Entar, Gardook of Demos." He gestured vaguely. "A Gardook is somewhat like a king, or a president. Demos, of course, is another planet, rather distant from Earth."

He turned to one of his companions, his equal in height.

"Better scale down a chair and table and kven board so that our guest may play in comfort, Kresan."

Then Entar turned back to Dave.

"Before we go any further I should like to make certain everything is clear. Please correct me if I am mistaken. This year there is no international chess tournament. But two of the contestants in this national tournament which you won were former world champions. Resnevsky, whom you defeated this evening, has defeated the European titleholder. Therefore you may be considered not only national, but world champion. Is that correct?"

"I . . . I suppose so," Dave said.

"Good. Now we had better begin. You may have first move."

But as they were seated, Entar towering above Dave, the Gardook hesitated.

"I suppose I had better warn you," he said. "It wouldn't be fair otherwise."

"Warn me about what?" Dave asked. He was completely bewildered.

"That you had better not lose. The stakes in this game are high."

"Stakes? I don't understand."

Entar seemed nettled by the delay. Then he muttered, "I suppose not," and turned to Kresan. "Contact the fleet."

A part of the instrument panel on the

wall slid away and its place was taken by a great screen. While Dave watched, the screen glowed, darkened, and was suddenly filled in with a background of stars. Against this background were ranged a full dozen circular ships, like the one in which Dave sat.

"Those ships are twenty thousand miles out in space," Entar said. "If you should win this game they will never come any closer."

"And if I lose?" Dave asked.

"Within five minutes after you lose they will have circled this diminutive planet and blasted it with rays which will kill every living thing on it."

DAVE'S mind whirled. He would have liked to think this was all a dream. But it wasn't. This gigantic, four-armed creature was as real as he was. Those space ships were real. And Entar meant what he said.

"Wait," Dave blurted. "You don't understand. I didn't really win that game tonight. It wasn't I . . ."

"That's ignoble," Entar said. "Trying to crawl out of it. You'd better begin playing before I change my mind about giving you a chance to save your planet."

Dave had no choice. In a daze, he moved a pawn forward in a routine opening. Entar shifted one of his pieces. Dave fought grimly to regain his composure. If he had to go through with this he might as well do his best.

He dawdled over his next move for long minutes, finally pushed up a Knight. Entar's move followed immediately, and he was smiling. Another two moves and the Gardook of Demos was chuckling.

Dave stared at the board helplessly. His own feeble skill would never win this game. Desperately he wracked his brain for some plan. In a few moves Entar had established the fact that he

was an unbelievably expert player.

Now Dave knew how Resnevsky must have felt. Now Dave wished with all his heart that Resnevsky had won. Resnevsky might have had a chance.

And yet Dave knew that was not true. With Earth at stake, there was only one person who might be good enough to beat Entar. Only Binky would have had a ghost of a chance.

"This is ridiculous," Entar was saying. "Kresan, order the fleet to prepare to blast."

"Wait," Dave begged. He had to think of something. If he could only talk to Binky!

"Wait," he said again, "you're taking an unfair advantage of me."

Entar's eyes narrowed to slits. "How do you mean that?"

"It's my wife," Dave said. "She's not well."

"What has that to do with it? Besides, she won't suffer long."

"But I can't keep my mind on the game. If I could only talk to her."

Entar made a gesture of disgust. "Kresan," he said. "can you arrange for Mr. Harkness to speak to his wife?"

"Yes. We can cut into the telephone circuit. It will take only a few minutes. What is your number, Mr. Harkness?"

Dave told him the number in a dull voice. His ruse had failed. But perhaps not completely. If he could speak to Binky for just a minute there might be something Binky could think of.

Kresan was turning some dials and there was the sound of a telephone ringing. The room was filled with it. Then Ellen's voice came in, loud but strangely unclear.

"Who is it?"

Kresan said, "Just speak naturally. She will hear you."

"It's I, Ellen," Dave said. She be-

gan to laugh crazily and he had to shout above her laughter. "Plug in the extension in Binky's room. I must speak to Binky."

But Ellen kept laughing. Suddenly Dave realized his wife was drunk; drunk and almost hysterical.

"I've got to talk to Binky!" Dave shouted desperately.

"That's funny" Ellen laughed. "Very funny."

Ellen hadn't laughed like that in years. It wasn't only liquor that was making her laugh now. Suddenly, just before she spoke, Dave knew why she was so happy.

"You can't talk to Binky. And he can't talk to you. It's very funny, Dave, but Binky wasn't lying about his heart. He died a half hour ago!"

ELLEN'S voice kept hammering inside Dave's head. He could still hear her. Binky was dead! The only one who might have saved the Earth. And he was dead!

"I think we have wasted enough time with these tricks," Entar was saying.

Dave nodded. No use in delaying further. What difference would another hour make. Might as well play and get it over with.

He made an attempt to think out a line of play. But that was useless. Entar blocked him before he had made two moves. It was no use. No matter what he played, Entar would win in another few moves. Dave reached for a piece, not caring which one his hand would touch first. Why prolong the agony?

"Hold it!"

Dave's hand stopped in mid-air. His jaw dropped. He must be going mad! That was Binky's voice he'd heard!

He looked around wildly. He was going mad. Binky was dead and he was only hearing an imaginary voice.

His hand came down on a Bishop. And the voice spoke again:

"Take it easy, Dave."

"But how. . . ?"

"I don't know. Dave. Somehow I knew you'd won tonight. I knew I was dying. But I suddenly knew I had to play one more game. I willed myself not to die, and part of me lived. I don't know how or why. But it did."

"Don't make me talk more than I must. It's taking all my will power to hold myself here and concentrate on this game. Just do as I say."

"All right," Dave whispered.

"We'll play him safe until I get a line on his game. Pawn to Queen five."

Dave moved the piece obediently and Entar shifted his Knight to Bishop four.

"Knight to Bishop five."

Entar suddenly looked up at Dave and then moved his own Knight over.

"Queen to King three."

"What?" Dave asked. He hadn't heard Binky's whisper. Binky repeated what he had said.

"What are you muttering about?" Entar grumbled.

He seemed perplexed now and took his time about shifting his own Pawn. When he looked at Dave again his eyes were thoughtful.

Every move now was debated, the result of long and careful deliberation. Binky's voice was less urgent.

"You're getting him now!" Dave whispered.

"Yes. He's never seen this one. The game Colle and Gruenfield played in Berlin in '26. Queen takes Pawn . . . Check!"

But Entar had lost his troubled look, and now when he moved his King out of check he was smiling. Binky's voice was suddenly frightened.

"No! I didn't think of that!"

"What's the matter?" Dave said.

"Are you trying to take my mind off

the game?" Entar demanded. Dave shook his head. He'd better watch himself.

"He outsmarted me," Binky whispered. "If I follow up with Pawn to Queen five he'll crack down with his Bishop. He's good, Dave. Maybe too good."

There was a sinking feeling in the pit of Dave's stomach. But Binky had not given up. He called off moves and Dave played them.

Twice it seemed that Entar was stopped cold and in trouble. Each time he extricated himself neatly and was in stronger position than before.

With superlative play Binky held the middle. His voice showed the strain he was under as Entar shifted to a fresh attack. It seemed that nothing, not even Binky, could stop the Gardook of Demos.

Then the worst happened. Binky's voice was growing faint.

"Dave! I can't hold myself here! Too much strain. I can't see the board any . . ."

"Binky!" Dave cried. "Binky!"

But there was no answer. Binky was gone. They had lost.

ENTAR leaned back and looked at the board. Dave's outburst had upset him momentarily, and then his next three moves had finished the game. The Gardook toyed with Dave's king, which he had just taken.

"Too bad," he began. "Of course, you play very erratically. Under other circumstances I should say, better luck next time. But there won't be a next time."

Dave didn't bother to answer. His head was sunk on his chest.

"Still, you did as well as could be expected," Entar said.

"As well!" Dave was bitter. "If Binky could have held on we might have

beaten you!"

"Binky? We? What are you talking about?"

"You asked me if I was trying to upset you," Dave said. "I wasn't. I was talking to someone you couldn't see. Someone who died over an hour ago. You couldn't hear him, but you could hear me."

"This fellow is a worse loser than Fenir," Entar said. He turned to Kresan. "I'm afraid losing has unsettled his mind. Better give the order to the fleet."

A flush crept up into Dave's cheeks. He was angry.

"I may not know how to play chess, but I'm not crazy!"

"Don't take it so hard," Entar told him. "I didn't say you can't play chess at all."

"The fleet is ready," Kresan interrupted. "As soon as Harkness has left the ship they will start the ray-blasts."

"Whether you said it or not, I really can't play," Dave said, ignoring Kresan's interruption. "Without Binky to plan my games I couldn't have beaten most average players."

Kresan was moving toward him but Entar waved the fleet commander back.

"Wait. This sounds interesting. Almost plausible, in fact. I noticed his play in the tournament. Like an automaton. And just now; he started badly, became suddenly strong, and then finished as though he didn't know what he was doing."

"That was when Binky faded out," Dave said.

"And just who is Binky?" Entar asked.

There didn't seem much point in it, but Dave told him. Something about Entar inspired confidence. Dave started at the beginning and told the whole story, even the things he had never told Ellen for fear she would not have



WITNESS FOR THE DEFENSE



Not everyone agrees that our world must end in chaos. Here is a simple statement of faith:

By Paul W. Fairman

Dear Editor:

In the June issue of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES, there appeared an excellent story by Bill McGivern entitled "Conditioned Reflex".

The story represented what I call the pessimistic school of thought relative to humanity. This is in direct opposition, of course, to the optimistic school. Bill's story, with all its merits,

ends upon a note of cynical hopelessness. And sadly, from my point of view, he makes it sound most convincing.

While I'm sure you have no wish to turn the pages of FA into a forum on the pro and con of the subject, I feel the optimistic school should be given its moment upon the witness stand. I present, for this reason, "Wit-

ness For The Defense", and ask that it be noted, so marked, and placed in the record.

Paul W. Fairman

* * *

OVER BEYOND the railroad tracks in the shelter of an old deserted tool shed, the world was on trial. The judge was a grinning half-wit named Bargy—a nondescript who sat on a packing box and leered into a fire of split rail-ties.

The prosecuting attorney had, in his time, saved nine men from the gallows. In other days he had been the brilliant J. Franklin Parkhurst. But that had been a thousand quarts ago. The first initial had long since been dropped. The Parkhurst had disappeared with his last clean shirt. All that now remained was Franky—and the ability to revert temporarily when the liquor hit him just right.

The attorney for the defense had had a church somewhere in his dim, misty past. Vague memories of its white steeple came back at times to blot out momentarily the bleak stretches of empty box cars. His name was Soft Joe. Where he'd gotten it no one knew nor cared.

Why these three should have met this chilly night to accuse and defend the world is as inexplicable as what had sent them down the long road toward oblivion—and probably as unimportant.

The trial began when Franky tipped the joint whisky bottle, passed it to Soft Joe, and said, "Your Honor, the prosecution will prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that the world deserves the supreme penalty—that it is not fit to exist in the great society of planets."

Soft Joe, squatting on the other side of the fire, took his turn at the bottle and said, "On the contrary, Your Honor, the defense will prove the prosecution has no grounds for its

accusations; no evidence other than rumor and the circumstantial."

Bargy grinned like a fool. "I sure do like to hear you fellers talk them big words. I sure do."

Franky pulled up the collar of his thin coat. "Will Your Honor please throw some more wood on the fire so we can start the trial?"

"Sure—sure." Bargy hopped out into the gloom and came back with a fragment of tie. He threw it into the flames and got back on his box grinning with pleasure.

"Now, who starts first, you guys?"

"It is customary for the prosecution to open the trial, Your Honor."

"Okay, that's you, Franky."

"Your Honor must ask the clerk to call the first witness."

Bargy writhed like an abused dog being given a modicum of kindness.

"Okay, clerk, call the first witness."

Franky hunched down further into his ragged coat. "I ask that Judas Iscariot be called to the stand." Then he pointed into the gloom; pointed a long finger, white in the semi-darkness. "You—Judas Iscariot—do you swear to tell the truth the whole truth and nothing but the truth?"

Bargy's poor brain clouded. His voice was plaintive. "I don't see nobody, you guys."

Franky sprang to his feet, indignant. "Can't see him? Great heaven! Are you blind? Can't you see him standing there in all his monumental rottenness and guilt? Can't you see the blood on his hands—the sacred blood dripping from those thirty pieces of silver."

"Naw," Bargy whimpered. "I can't see nothing."

Soft Joe looked out through his alcoholic haze. "Don't be harsh with the poor unfortunate, Franky. He suffers from the curse of his own existence."

Bargy turned eagerly to his de-

fender. "You call one. You call one now. I'll look hard."

"I ask that Abraham Lincoln be brought to the stand."

Bargy's right eye slanted upward. His efforts to pierce the gloom were ludicrous, pitiful; pitiful as his twisted stance and sidwinding hop.

"Can't you see him, Bargy?" Soft Joe asked. "Think of all the people who ever gave you a break. Think of the cop who didn't club you; the housewife who gave you food; the children who didn't laugh."

"Ya know, you guys—I think I can—I think—"

"Irrelevant," Franky snapped. "Immaterial. Call me two witnesses—Rasputin and Benedict Arnold."

An icy gush of wind whirled around the corner of the shed and whipped the flames aside, revealing the red-hot skeletons of wood. Soft Joe tipped the bottle and let the heat gush down his throat. He handed it to Bargy. "Warm your ribs, boy."

Bargy drank, gagged, passed the bottle on. "Whadda they look like—this Ras—Ras—"

"Like evil triumphant, Your Honor. Look not upon their persons, but into their black hearts. A world capable of producing such specimens is but a cancerous growth in the clean universe. It should be destroyed now."

Soft Joe shivered and said, "Call up St. Francis of Assisi, Alexander Hamilton, Joan of Arc."

"Blackbeard the pirate and Geronimo," Franky countered.

"Booker T. Washington and Madame Curie."

"Caesar, Attila the Hun."

"Martin Luther, William Shakespeare."

A train whistle moaned far away. Bargy looked ready to burst into tears. "Aw—I can't see any o' them guys."

Franky said, "The hell with it," as

he hunched closer to the fire.

Tears came to Bargy's eyes. "Naw—don't stop. Please don't stop, you guys. I like it sitting here. I don't want to quit."

"It's late and the bottle is empty. We'll sum up."

"Sure—do that—what you said."

"Your Honor, corruption flourishes in the cities of earth. Hoodlums and gangsters find honor in the public eye. Crime and government are interlocked. War and bloodshed flourish. Every man has dishonesty in his heart. They are all of—"

Soft Joe said, "I refute that last. Every man does not have dishonesty in his heart."

"There isn't a man in this nation who wouldn't get a traffic ticket fixed if the opportunity presented itself. Is that bottle completely empty?"

"Yes. But a traffic ticket is a small thing."

"So is the point of a bayonet on the end of a rifle, but it pierces the hearts of men. Your Honor, I ask for a verdict of guilty."

"May I testify for the defense?"

The voice came from the shadows by the shed. The three looked up and saw a dark form in the furthest perimeter of the firelight. Their first instinct was fear. An arm of the law. The foot of a railroad dick.

Bargy got down from his box. He said, "Hey, you guys—I can see him." Bargy crept closer.

"I have listened with interest," the stranger went on, "and I sense a most important point you have evidently overlooked. One which should not be overlooked. If I may, I will use the wall of this building upon which to illustrate."

The stranger, still but a shadow, stepped close to the wall of the shed. He stooped now to pick up a handful of earth. It trickled slowly through his fingers. "Back in the beginning,"

he said, "Man came first—from this. Please bear with me while I mark out a graph upon this wall."

He stretched forth his arm and drew a jagged line beginning at the extreme edge of the wall and tracing inward. When he had finished, the line was some six inches in length; an irregular graph with its end slightly higher than its beginning.

"The length of that line represents Man's entire history; his rises, his falls; his triumphs, his despairs. That six inches indicates five hundred thousand years."

The stranger waited, as though for comment. Words came only from Bargo who moved closer, then turned and grinned at his companions. "I can see this witness, you guys. I can see him fine."

Now the stranger moved in long strides to the far end of the wall, some fifteen feet away. There he blended with the night but his voice came clear: "And the length of this wall, gentlemen, represents the distance Man still must travel before his shining goal is reached. It marks the untold eras and ages during which he has yet—through trial and error, through effort, failure and success—to fulfill his destiny: So you can easily see that at present he is little more than a creeping infant."

There was a moment of silence while even the wind held motionless; while the flames of the fire, by some grotesque illusion, seemed frozen.

The voice went on cheerfully: "A half million years, gentlemen and yet—mark this—he already knows good from evil; right from wrong. All your human examples of what the earth has produced—no matter how low they sank, how high they soared—had that knowledge in common—the difference between right and wrong. Think, gentlemen—is that not remarkable progress for so frightened and

bewildered a creature? He knows not where he came from nor why. He knows not where he is going nor how. *But he knows right from wrong.*"

Now the wind blew and the fire writhed and Bargo said with the disappointment of a tired child: "Aw, he's gone. I can't see him no more."

But came a faint voice on the wind: "We should by all means allow the earth to continue its magnificent work."

It was cold again. Franky shivered. "I wonder why he left so suddenly. Who do you suppose he was?"

Soft Joe said, "Funny—I'm certain I heard that voice once—a long time ago."

"Here's a card he dropped, you guys—look."

"A calling card, I believe." Franky held out his hand. "Let me see it."

"No—lemme. I can read. I learnt to read good. Lemme."

Bargo held the card close to the fire. He squinted at it importantly. "It's tore in half. Only the bottom left. There ain't no name, but it's got what business the guy's in and where he lives."

Soft Joe said, "Read it, Bargo."

"Gal—Gal—Galilee. Some tank town, I guess. I ain't never been there. And he's a carpenter, it says. But they ain't no phone."

Bargo dropped the card into the fire. "Come on. Let's play court some more. The Express ain't due for another twenty minutes. Let's kill time and do it again, huh?"

THE END

* * *

(Concluded from page 68)

ing in the contentment of perfect understanding, of relaxed fatigue. Finally, when Lew turned to kiss her, he paused, his muscles tensing.

"What is it?" Diana asked.

"Listen," he told her, lifting his head so that his eyes could scan the bowl of the sky

"I don't hear anything—" she began, broke off as far, far above them a faint whining drone sounded, increased rapidly in volume as if whatever were making it were entering the atmosphere at tremendous speed. It grew louder, louder...

Then they heard the faint throb-

bing echo of a far-distant explosion and saw a small white cloud blossom from nowhere, far higher than any cloud could rise. Diana's fist flew to her mouth and she buried her face in Lew's jacket.

"It's probably a good thing," he told her gently, "that your mother didn't live to know of this. They must have hit the air envelope at the wrong angle." He paused, pressed toe on the starter, added, "Come on, honey, let's get back to the hotel and get some shut-eye. We're working tonight."

THE END

(Concluded from page 81)

Sidney turned and with slow faltering steps walked back along the corridor. From a side door, the one he had used himself, came a man with a flushed angry face and bewildered eyes. The man carried a brief case under one arm, and held a card in his hand. He was a fat man, with a heavy jaw and thinning black hair.

"Hey, you," he said to Sidney. "I've been getting the run around in this damn building for the past half hour. It's 10 East Fifth Avenue, isn't it?"

"Well, it might be," Sidney answered.

"You mean, you don't know?"

"Well, not exactly."

The man swore. "Are you all nuts in here? Starters, elevator men, clean-

ing women, are you all nuts? Will you tell me where the hell I can get a straight answer, please?"

"You'll have to see the building manager."

The man looked relieved. "Well, where is he?"

"His office is just around the corner," Sidney said.

"Well, thanks. Thanks a lot. I'll burn his ears, let me tell you."

With that the man clutched the brief case under his arm and walked down the corridor with angry, determined strides.

Sidney sighed. And then, with only the faintest curiosity stirring in his soul, he went slowly toward the elevators that only and forever travelled upward.

THE END





HE KNEW ALL THE ANSWERS

By Dallas Ross

**What really happens when the lights go out?
Does the sun remain when you close your eyes?
In case of doubt, ask Jeremiah. He knows . . .**

SUCH WAS Jeremiah Perkins' appearance and manner that nobody ever called him Jerry; not even his dear wife, Martha.

It occurred to him, one morning at breakfast, that he had no reason to believe that the light stayed on when he closed his eyes and he expressed

that opinion to Martha while between the editorial page and the financial section.

"What was that, dear?" she asked blearily. Martha was invariably bleary in the mornings which was one of the factors contributing to Perkins' critical opinion of the



connubial tie; another was that he had an antipathy for *large* women and Martha was rather more than twice his size, going pound for pound, of course, rather than by inches.

He enunciated clearly—and made it a point to *show* he was enunciating clearly—"I said that I have no reason to believe that the light stays on when I close my eyes."

"Oh." Martha went back to spreading a revoltingly thick layer of honey on her toast and Jeremiah Perkins returned to contemplation of the financial section.

"But, Jeremiah," his wife said finally. "Of course the light stays on when you close your eyes."

He lifted the eyes in question to hers and explained patiently, "I didn't say that it didn't, I merely stated that I have no reason to believe it does." His eyes went back to the stock market reports. "Which is an entirely different matter," he added.

Martha said weakly, "I don't believe I know *quite* what you mean, Jeremiah."

With an air of considerable patience, he put down the paper and stared at her through his heavy lensed pince-nez glasses. "Then I shall explain it very simply," he told her.

"You have possibly heard of persons who wondered whether or not the little light in the refrigerator remains on when the door of the refrigerator is closed."

"Oh, yes," Martha said with enthusiasm and nodded her head until her chins wobbled disgustingly. "Mrs. Klatz was telling us a joke at the bridge club only last week about—"

He stared at her coldly and she stopped telling him about Mrs. Klatz and said, "Yes, dear."

He went on, "Now there are various ways in which it can be demonstrated to an even moderately lucid person that the light does indeed go

out when the refrigerator door is shut. One recommended method is to put a small child into the refrigerator and close the door. However, this system depends upon the veracity of the child and I personally am not inclined to gullibility. Much better is to cut a small window in the door of the refrigerator; then the person in doubt can himself observe what develops when the door of the refrigerator is closed. Do you understand thus far?"

She swallowed her current mouthful of honeyed bread hurriedly and said, "Yes, dear."

"Very well. Now my point was that while it can be proven satisfactorily that the light in the refrigerator does go off when the door is closed, I have no provable evidence that the light remains on when my eyes are closed."

She blinked at him, nearly spilling the cup of coffee she held in her plump right hand. He noted that, as usual, she'd filled her cup with quite as much heavy cream as with coffee.

He went on to elucidate further. "Suppose I enter a theatre during the day. What reason have I to believe that the sun remains on while I am inside?"

She offered hesitantly, "You could get up in the middle of the show and go and see."

Perkins snorted indignantly. "Don't you understand? If I did, by that time *they* would have turned it back on again."

He returned to his newspaper, closing the subject.

POSSIBLY the matter would have remained closed indefinitely had it not been for the fact that Mrs. Jeremiah Perkins noticed that her husband was evidently doing what he could in the way of checking upon his susp'cons. For instance, that Sunday, while he was working down in the basement on his mushroom and toad-

stool collection, she noted that from time to time he would dash hurriedly up the stairs to peer disgustedly out the kitchen window.

At lunch he muttered, to no one in particular, "I nearly caught it yesterday when I got off the subway two stations before my stop and went up to the street."

Even then, Martha, who was a more than usually cautious wife when it came to these things—and don't think such matters hadn't come up before—would have done nothing if he'd just gone on for a time and then forgotten about it. The trouble was, he didn't forget; in fact, he got worse. He was continually devising situations in which he would be out of sight of the sun; in a theatre, in a subway, in the basement, in some room without a window, in the attic; then, abruptly, he'd make a sudden dash to check on whether or not the sun remained on while he was out of range of its beams.

He seemed disappointed when it invariably did.

One night when they were seated in the living room after dinner, she offered quietly, "Why would *they* want to turn the light out when your eyes are closed or when you're in the cellar or the attic?"

He had been rereading the Kinsey report but he looked up impatiently to say, "How would I know? Possibly to conserve power."

Ordinarily she would have gone no further, since his tone was even more than usually petulant, but she steeled herself and said, "Who are *they*, dear?"

"Who are who?" he snapped. "If you must talk, please try to be coherent, Martha."

"Who are *they* who might turn out the light when your eyes are closed?"

He sighed deeply and closed his book, leaving a forefinger at the page

where he'd left off. He took off his pince-nez glasses and said, "I haven't the vaguest idea. But whoever they are, I am rapidly arriving at the opinion, that they are managing this whole project extremely inefficiently. *Extremely* so."

She'd gone too far now to back down, so she said, as placatingly as possible, "What project, dear?"

He looked at her for a long moment, his mouth tight with impatience. "Very well," he said finally, "I see you intend to maintain the pretense to the end. Undoubtedly, those are your instructions."

"I give you to realize, and your superiors as well, that I have been aware of the true nature of—shall we say?—this *world*, for some time."

SHE BEGAN to open her mouth to say something but he flicked a hand at her negatively and went on. "The big mistake has been in making it so obviously fantastic. Whoever is in ultimate charge, might have been more successful in deceiving me had the sum total of your efforts added up to a bit more plausibility."

"But... Jeremiah..."

"Quiet please, until I finish, Martha. I have been aware for a considerable period that the sole reason for the existence of this so-called world and everyone in it, and all that goes on in it, has been to keep the true nature of things from me: to befuddle my mind and so confuse me that I remain unaware of actuality. Very well, I contend that the undertaking is being poorly administered. I admit that I don't really understand *why* this is being done, but whatever the reason it is quite slipshod, I assure you. Quite."

He replaced his glasses on the bridge of his nose and went back to his book, obviously content to leave the subject at that point.

But Martha was inordinately valiant tonight. She said, "What is fantastic, Jeremiah? I don't believe I understand quite what—"

He sighed deeply once again, placed his book on the tea table before him and returned his glasses to his pocket.

"Almost everything," he said quietly. For a moment he looked as though he'd forgotten her, that he was talking to himself. His eyes went to the ceiling and he continued softly, "Almost all of it is utterly fantastic.

"Take, for instance, our governmental and social systems. Is there a sane one on earth?"

"You shouldn't speak against the government, dear," she said primly, evidently feeling fairly sure of herself on this point.

"The socio-economic system of this country is fantastic in the extreme," he said, ignoring her. "You would think it impossible that a more ridiculous one could exist; but all you have to do is look to England to find it. Of course, when you get to the Soviet Union things degenerate into absolute burlesque.

"But that isn't enough; where the whole project really becomes absurd to the point of extravaganza is the relationship between individuals. Take the relation between the sexes as the classic example. It would be difficult to imagine anything more utterly farcical than that two persons—such as you and I, for instance—should fall in love, whatever that is supposed to be, and remain in juxtaposition with each other for the balance of their lives. The supposed ultimate purpose of this, of course, is the breeding of further 'humans' to continue the insanity of it all."

Martha began crying.

"Please," he snapped. "I shall develop the point no further. I merely wished to make it clear that I *know*, that I realize it is all a farce and that

you are part of the farce. You may continue playing your part . . ."

HE TOOK his glasses from his pocket, rearranged them carefully on his nose again and returned to the findings of Dr. Kinsey. "I am surprised that *they* allowed the printing of this book," he remarked in general.

After a lengthy period of sobbing to which he remained immune, Martha dried her eyes bravely and stammered, "Possibly you should see a doctor, dear."

Without looking up, her husband informed her, "I was expecting that suggestion momentarily. Please don't bother to mention it again."

"Yes, dear. But, Jeremiah—"

He put his book down for the third time and closed his eyes for a long moment. Finally he opened them and looked at her severely. "Martha," he said, "I consider myself a more than average tolerant person; however, I am becoming extremely weary of this conversation. I will repeat my conclusions once more, then I wish to hear no more about it.

"The question of whether or not the light remains on is comparatively unimportant although admittedly it has intrigued me. The important consideration is that I am aware of the nature of this so-called world and its inhabitants and I am not deceived."

He shifted around in his chair so that his back was to her and reached out for his book again.

"Very well," Martha said, "if you are not deceived, there is little reason to carry on the attempted deception."

"None at all," he muttered testily.

So Martha dissolved into her true shape and slithered across the living room floor and out the front door to report to her superiors.

Jeremiah Perkins didn't bother to look up as she left.

let him keep Binky at home.

"It was partly his fault," Dave said. "But after all, he was the one who lost most. I tried to make it up to him."

"Even though you were not legally responsible?"

"It wasn't a question of legality. I couldn't have lived with myself if I hadn't taken him into my home. And then, when he told me of his ambition, I simply had to do everything in my power to help him attain it. He was entitled to whatever happiness I could give him."

Dave found that Entar was looking at him very strangely. He laughed shortly.

"I suppose it's hard to believe my story," he said.

"Not so difficult. The more we know, the less skeptical we are likely to be."

"Well," Dave shrugged, "it doesn't matter now. Binky is gone and it's all over. He's the only one who could have beat you."

"Not even your Binky could have beat me," Entar assured him.

"We'll never know. Now, if you'll show me how to get out I'll be going. And you can carry out your threat."

"I don't think so," Entar said. "No, I don't think so."

"But I lost," Dave said in astonishment. "Even with Binky's help I lost."

"Binky lost. But you didn't lose. There isn't enough intelligence on this planet of yours to have saved it. But there is something else that's more important than intelligence. You have that something else."

"I don't understand," Dave said.

"Naturally. Well, in a little while we shall be on our way back to Demos. Before Kresan takes you out to the automobile I would like to shake your hand. Goodbye, Mr. Harkness."

ALL the lights in the house were on when Dave stopped the car before it. He came up the walk slowly, shaking his head like a man pulling himself out of a dream.

Ellen was waiting for him inside; and now she did not seem drunk at all. Her arms went around Dave. For the first time in many months her cheek was pressed against his in affection.

"I'm sorry, dear," Ellen said. "I must have upset you terribly. But it seemed as though suddenly a tremendous load was off my shoulders. I just went crazy, I guess."

"It's all right. I realize what you've been through since Binky came. He's really dead, isn't he?"

"Yes. It happened about midnight, I think. He looked quite peaceful, as though he knew you'd won."

"Poor fellow. He was a great man, Ellen."

"Perhaps. And so are you, Dave, in a different way."

"I don't understand," Dave said for the second time that night.

He thought that perhaps it was because he was very tired that he could not see what Ellen and Entar meant. He had only done what was right. He was sure that anyone with a good heart would have done the same.

WORLDS OF WONDER

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ONE GUITAR

by Sam Merwin Jr.

YOU TAKE THE HIGH ROAD

by Stephen Marlowe

THERE'S NO WAY OUT

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WITNESS FOR THE DEFENSE

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